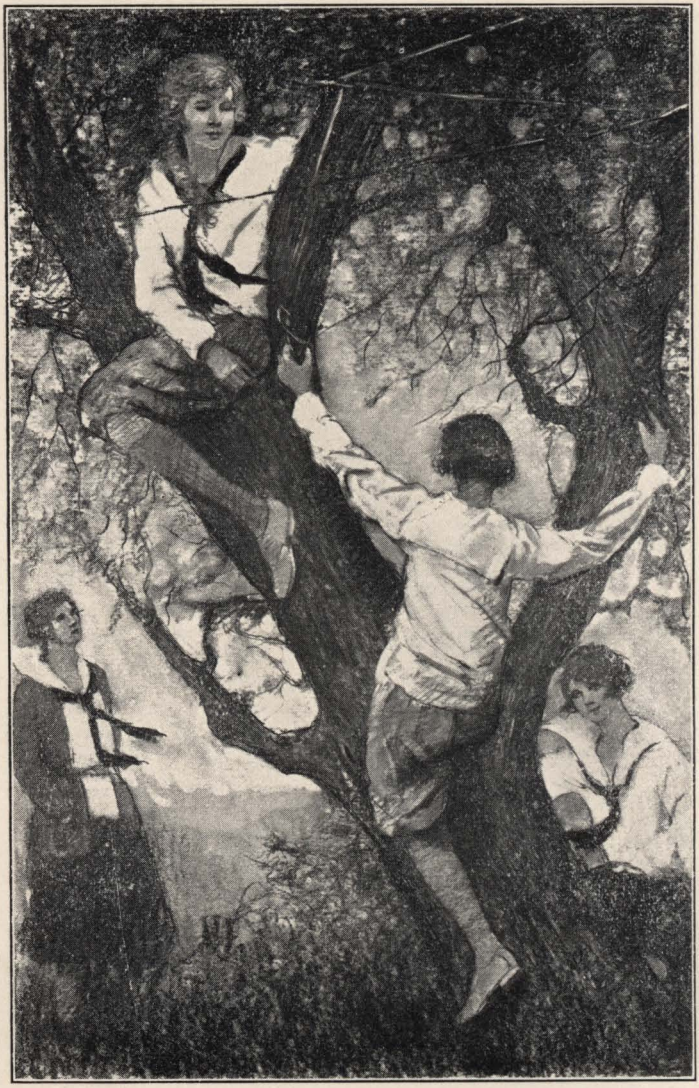
The RADIO GIRLS AT FOREST LODGE

MARGARET PENROSE

To Dorothy
From Caroline
Xmas 1924



"DON'T MOVE, JESS. I AM COMING UP."

"The Radio Girls at Forest Lodge." Page 87

THE RADIO GIRLS AT FOREST LODGE

OR

The Strange Hut in the Swamp

BY

MARGARET PENROSE

AUTHOR OF "THE RADIO GIRLS OF ROSELAWN," "THE RADIO GIRLS ON STATION ISLAND," "DOROTHY DALE SERIES," "MOTOR GIRLS SERIES," ETC.

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THE RADIO GIRLS ON THE PROGRAM
THE RADIO GIRLS ON STATION ISLAND
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The Radio Girls at Forest Lodge

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THE RADIO GIRLS AT FOREST LODGE

CHAPTER I

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

"I DON'T know much about your Aunt Emma, Burd, but I am quite certain I shall adore her."

Burd Alling, pudgy and good-natured, looked at Amy Drew and slowly grinned.

"Good for you, Amy," he said, returning to his plate of ice cream with renewed vigor. "People either hate Aunt Emma or love her. I am glad you have decided on the latter."

"She must be a strange sort of person, your Aunt Emma," said Jessie Norwood, the third of the little party seated around the table at the Dainties Shop. "I like people who have positive characters."

"Oh, Aunt Em is positive enough, if that is what you like," chuckled Burd. "The worst thing about her is that she doesn't seem to approve of that characteristic in others."

"You say this Aunt Emma of yours owns this

place called Forest Lodge?" Jessie interrupted eagerly. "Where is it, Burd?"

"In a forest, I suppose," murmured Amy Drew.

"How bright you are," scoffed Burd. "Forest Lodge is on Lake Towako, about forty miles from New Melford," he added to Jessie. "Aunt Em wants to spend a week or two up in the woods, and she was bemoaning the fact, by letter, that she had no one to go with her. I mean, no ladies. Of course, I'm already booked to go."

"How about us?" interposed Amy, smiling her sweetest. "Wouldn't we do?"

"Would you like to?" cried Burd, his face lighting up over the idea.

"Amy, how could you propose such a thing!" interposed Jessie, demurely. "Don't you know you practically asked for an invitation?"

"Leave out the practically and you will have it," returned Amy, unabashed. "Besides, didn't you hear Burd say his poor dear aunt would be lonely away up there in the woods by herself? Be charitable, Jessie! Be charitable."

"But, say, if you girls really think you would like to go, I know Aunt Em will be more than glad to have you," said Burd. "She will greet you as gifts from heaven."

"Well, Jess may look like an angel, but I am sure I don't," remarked Amy, paying fond attention to the remaining portion of her George

Washington sundae. "Never mind the compliments, Burd. Tell us more about your aunt."

"Do you think Nell Stanley could go too?" broke in Jessie, eagerly. The prospect of a two weeks' added vacation at Forest Lodge was becoming alluring.

"Sure thing! The more the merrier," Burd answered, heartily. He finished his ice cream and motioned to Nick, the clerk, to bring more George Washington sundaes. "She is a jolly old soul and never is happy unless completely surrounded by young folks."

"Oh, is she so very old?" asked Amy.

"We-ell, not so old as to be exactly decrepit," said Burd, judicially, though his eyes were merry. "She can still hop around pretty lively when occasion requires. But I will not tell you another word," he added, his round face as severe as so habitually merry a countenance could ever become. "Whatever else you learn about the lady, you will have to learn from her personally. I refuse to give away a blood relative."

"But, Burd, all this is so very wonderful!" cried Jessie. "I never dared hope we would have another chance for fun this summer before school opens."

"Oh, Jess, remind me not," commanded Amy, with a groan. "As Miss Seymour would say,

'Why intrude so gloomy a thought upon this joyous hour?' "

The Miss Seymour of whom Amy spoke was a teacher of English in the high school which Jessie and Amy and their friend, Nell Stanley, attended.

The Radio Girls had returned from a wonderful vacation on Station Island only a few days before this story opens. And now had come this possibility of spending the short remainder of their school vacation at a typical hunting lodge in the heart of a forest. Small wonder that with this alluring prospect before them they could not bear the mention just then of school and studies, for to their eager minds the possibility of the visit looked like certainty.

"Have you told Darry yet?" Jessie asked, and Burd favored her with a look that was almost pitying. Darry, or Darrington Drew, to give him the benefit of his full name, was Amy's brother and Burd Alling's closest chum. The two boys, though utterly unlike in looks and disposition, were inseparable.

"Sure, I've told Darry," he said, in reply to Jessie's question. "His enthusiasm over the project knows no bounds. Says it has been his lifelong ambition to get in close contact with the forest rangers and study their methods of fighting forest fires."

"Oh, do they have fires up there, too?" queried Amy.

"Wherever there is a forest, there are bound to be fires once in a while," Burd informed her, from the heights of his superior wisdom. Darry and Burd, being in college, were several years older than the high school girls, and it was seldom that they missed an opportunity to impress that fact upon Jessie and Amy. "That's where the forest rangers come in. And, believe me, sometimes they have their work cut out for them, too."

"Oh, Burd, please tell me more about it," begged Jessie.

"I can't tell you much," replied Burd, modestly, "because I don't know a great deal about the work of the forest rangers—nothing, in fact, except what I have read. But I know there is one thing that will interest you girls mightily."

"Bet you another George Washington sundae I know what it is," said Amy, quickly, and when Burd laughingly took her up she pronounced the one word "Radio!" with proud emphasis.

"Oh, I know," broke in Jessie, before Burd could speak. "I heard Daddy Norwood talking about it one night to Momsey, and it was awfully interesting, even though at that time I was not particularly interested in radio. They use it—radio, I mean—fighting fires and things, don't they?"

"Especially things," agreed Burd, with a grin. Then, becoming suddenly conscious of the check at his elbow, he looked up and found Nick's worried gaze upon him. The Dainties Shop was filling up and their table was needed.

The girls took in the situation at a glance and rose laughingly while Burd went over to settle with Nick, much to the relief of the latter.

Burd seemed to be having some trouble getting his change, and while they waited for him outside the door of the Dainties Shop the girls gayly discussed this new prospect.

"I am dreadfully anxious to meet Aunt Emma," Amy was saying when she felt a slight touch on her arm and turned sharply about.

A tall, slender girl was standing there, and on her face was a dead white pallor that amazed and shocked the robust girls.

She was holding toward them a five-dollar bill and Amy, the irrepressible, laughed suddenly as her gaze fell upon it.

"Thanks, so much," she murmured; "but I don't happen to need it just now."

"Oh, Amy, hush!" cried Jessie, as she saw the mouth of the strange girl set in a thin straight line and her eyes grow hostile.

"I wanted to ask you if you would change this for me," said the stranger in a colorless voice

that matched the pallor of her face. "But if you don't care to——"

She turned away, but Jessie caught her quickly by the sleeve.

"Oh, wait a minute, please," she said. "I am sure I can change the bill for you."

She fumbled in her bag, but Amy, instantly regretting her flippant speech, found the money first in her own small bag and handed it with an apologetic smile to the girl.

"I'm sorry I was rude," she said. "I didn't understand."

This apology meant a great deal, coming, as it did, from Amy, but the tall, pale girl seemed scarcely to notice. She accepted the five one-dollar bills, giving her own five-dollar note in exchange. Amy stuffed the bill in her pocket, and with a muttered word of thanks the stranger turned and walked off swiftly. She did not turn back, and in another moment a street corner hid her from view.

"I must say she isn't very polite," grumbled Amy, as Burd joined them. "After humbling my perfectly good pride in the dust and everything. Imagine me apologizing!"

"If I had not seen it I certainly would not have believed it," agreed Jessie, cheerfully, and Amy shot her an injured look.

"You mean heard it," she corrected frigidly.

"If I cared to be unkind, my dear, I might remind you that an apology can never be seen!"

Burd went with them as far as the Norwood place in Roselawn. There he left them, intimating that he and Darry had important business in town and would not see them till later.

"Make it as much later as you like," Amy told him cheerfully. "We shan't pine away and die in your absence."

As a matter of fact, the girls were far too busy for the remainder of that afternoon to give the boys more than a passing thought. They chattered like magpies of the possible trip to Forest Lodge while, with skilful fingers, they overhauled the radio set which Jessie and Amy themselves had set up in the pretty and spacious living room of Jessie's own suite of rooms in the Norwood house. Jessie had brought a new detector from town and was bent upon trying the effect of it upon her set without delay.

"We must be ready for the special radio concert to-night," Jessie reminded her, when Amy protested against the "hard labor" her friend imposed. "It wouldn't do to miss it, and you know this detector is working badly."

Mrs. Norwood, known fondly to her daughter, and to most of her daughter's intimate friends as well, as "Momsey," was away from home that afternoon—a matter of great regret to Jessie,

who had hoped to talk over with her at once the invitation for Forest Lodge and ask her consent to the project.

It was late before she returned, and by that time the girls had "jacked up" the radio set until it was working perfectly. They fell upon Mrs. Norwood simultaneously, bombarding her with facts and questions until Mrs. Norwood laughed in helpless bewilderment and begged them to begin all over again from the beginning and "go slowly." This they did, and had hardly finished when the telephone bell rang.

"Miss Alling would like to speak to you, Mrs. Norwood," announced the maid, coming into the room.

The girls could hardly wait for the telephone conversation to come to an end, and, in their eagerness, did no more than stutter their questions when Mrs. Norwood returned, a smile on her face.

They were overjoyed to find Mrs. Norwood pleasantly willing to give her consent to the Forest Lodge project, especially now that Emma Alling had given them her personal invitation to accompany her. It seemed that at some former time Mrs. Norwood and Miss Alling had worked together in some benefit scheme, and Mrs. Norwood had been strongly attracted to the rather eccentric but good-hearted woman.

"All of which is very lucky for us," remarked the irrepressible Amy.

"Though I must say," Mrs. Norwood added, with a smile, "I don't particularly envy Emma Alling her present undertaking!"

Jessie's eyes twinkled as she said reproachfully: "Don't you think that is rather hard on us, Momsey?"

Amy hastened home to gain permission to make the visit at Forest Lodge, but was persuaded without much difficulty to return for dinner, and as soon as the meal was over, the girls ran up to Jessie's room to "listen in" on the special concert that was scheduled for that evening.

They tuned the set to the wave length of the broadcasting station of the Stratford Electric Company and almost immediately heard a man's voice speaking. The first words were sufficiently unusual to catch and hold their attention.

"Before proceeding with the program, we wish to make a special announcement," said the voice. "There is positive evidence that a counterfeit five-dollar bill is in circulation in this locality. The bill has a small v-shaped notch in one corner of it and the marking on the under side is indistinct. We wish all who hear this announcement to-night to be on the lookout for the counterfeit money, so that any one finding it in his possession may report it to the authorities." That was all.

The girls removed their head phones and stared at each other intently for a moment. It was evident that they were both thinking of the same thing. That five-dollar bill which the strange girl had asked Amy to change that afternoon!

Amy reached for her purse and opened it.

"If that girl wished a counterfeit five-dollar bill on me," she declared, "I will pursue her to the ends of the earth and get it back."

"Quick! Let me see that bill," urged Jessie.

Together, heads almost touching, they examined the greenback which had come so strangely into their possession. To their inexperienced eyes there was nothing wrong with the marking. Then Jessie suddenly uttered an exclamation. She pointed to a tiny, v-shaped notch in one corner of it.

"Amy, it is, it must be, one of the counterfeits!" she breathed.

CHAPTER II

THE COUNTERFEIT BILL

EAGERLY Jessie and Amy scrutinized the bill again and, with the v-shaped notch to help them, they saw, or thought they saw, that the marking on the under side of the bill was a trifle blurred and indistinct.

Even then they were not satisfied, but must run down to show the note to Mr. Norwood, who sat chatting with Momsey in the living room.

"Daddy Norwood, if you tell me this bill is a counterfeit, I will never forgive you," was Jessie's greeting to her father, as she dropped on the arm of his chair and thrust the bill into his hand.

"What's this, what's this?" exclaimed Mr. Norwood, smiling at the two girls. "What is all this talk about counterfeits? Am I to understand, my daughter, that you have turned criminal?"

"And she is so young, too," murmured Amy, beneath her breath.

"Please look at it, Daddy Norwood," urged Jessie, indicating the bill which dangled carelessly from her father's hand.

"Well," said the latter, mildly, "I am looking

at it. Now suppose you tell me what all the excitement is about."

Between them the girls told him of the announcement by radio of the dangerous counterfeit five-dollar bill that was in circulation.

As they proceeded, the lawyer's face became grave and he examined the bill carefully and with a sudden intense interest.

"Hm! I have heard about this counterfeit money," he said, after a pause during which the girls, and Mrs. Norwood, too, regarded him expectantly. "And it is a very serious matter, let me tell you."

"But is this bill counterfeit?" asked Jessie, impatiently.

Mr. Norwood looked up at her with a peculiar smile, then down at the note again.

"It certainly is a remarkably clever imitation," he said.

"Then it is a counterfeit!" declared Jessie, and turned to face Amy, whose expressive face was a mirror of conflicting emotions.

"Now I will have to keep my vow," wailed the latter, "and follow that wretched girl all over the world!"

"What for?" asked Mrs. Norwood, with an indulgent smile, for she was well used to Amy's extravagances.

"To recover my perfectly good five dollars, of course! Oh, dear, what a bore!"

"Oh, so a girl palmed this off on you! Suppose you tell me some more about it," said Mr. Norwood. "I am intensely interested."

Jessie and Amy told him about the strange girl who had accosted them before the Dainties Shop and gave as faithful a description as they could of her. Then they suddenly remembered the interrupted radio concert and dashed off to Jessie's room to enjoy what was left of it.

Madame Elva, a great favorite of the girls, at the broadcasting station of the Stratford Electric Company, gave several charming selections and the remainder of the program was so unusually fine and interesting that the girls became completely absorbed and forgot for the time all such matters as tall thin girls and troublesome five-dollar bills.

It was not till the following morning that Jessie revived the subject. The four of them, Jessie, Amy, her brother Darry, and Burd Alling were sitting on the Norwood veranda talking over plans for the trip to Forest Lodge. The girls had already, earlier in the day, talked with Miss Alling over the telephone.

It was a fine morning and the handsome Norwood estate had never looked pleasanter and

more luxurious than it did in the full glare of the morning sunlight.

The smooth sweep of lawn, sloping down to the broad, shaded boulevard, was dotted with flowering shrubs. Beside the house and a little to the rear, began the beautiful rose gardens which were the pride of Mrs. Norwood's heart, and of all Roselawn as well.

In fact, this section where the Norwoods and the Drews lived had been dubbed Roselawn by reason of the beautiful and gorgeous rose gardens that abounded in that district.

On the farther side of Bonwit Boulevard was the home of the Drews, a rambling old house which had once been a farmhouse but had been remodeled by Mr. Drew into an up-to-date and handsome building. There dwelt Wilbur and Sarah Drew, the parents of Amy, Amy, herself, and her brother Darrington—the latter, however, only on those rare occasions when Yale "relaxed her grip on him."

The four young people had had many good times together and since Jessie and Amy had "discovered" radio their adventures had been replete with thrills and excitement.

The two girls had astonished their friends and relatives by successfully installing a radio set in Jessie's room.

Then one day had come a mysterious call out

of the air, and how the girls went to the rescue of a girl wanted as a witness in an important law case has been told in detail in the first volume of this series, entitled "The Radio Girls of Rose-lawn."

Since that time the girls had made the acquaintance of the owner of a large sending station and through him had been permitted to get "On the Program," much to their satisfaction. Then they had gone to "Station Island," and later had taken a trip on board the *Marigold,* a steam yacht willed to Darry by his uncle. The vessel took fire, and how the young folks had to fight to escape in safety is related in the volume before this, called "The Radio Girls on Station Island."

It was of this last adventure that they were thinking and talking now as they sat in idle luxury upon Jessie Norwood's porch.

"The poor old *Marigold* is almost a total loss," Darry said, regretfully. "I have laid her up for repairs, and, judging from the amount of work there is to be done on her, it looks as if she would be in dry dock a considerable time."

"Oh, dear! No more chance to inspect the bottom of the sea!" sighed Amy. "I think you are too mean, Darry Drew."

"Well, say," interrupted Burd, rising from the depths of a comfortable chair and stretching

luxuriously, "loth as I am to break up this happy party, I fear I must be going."

"He has a date and won't let us in on it," remarked Amy, reproachfully.

"I sure have," chuckled Burd, unabashed. "And wait till you see the lady!"

Darry raised his eyebrows and grinned.

"Aunt Emma, Burd?" he asked.

Burd nodded and started for the steps.

"Promised to meet her at the train in the old bus," he said. "And if anything should make me late I should never hear the end of it. Coming, Darry?"

The latter laughingly shook his head.

"Go ahead, old lad," he said. "I am not looking for punishment just yet."

"Why, don't you like Miss Alling?" asked Jessie, surprised.

"I do. She is the salt of the earth," replied Darry, emphatically, adding with a rueful smile: "The only trouble is, she doesn't like me. Has a fixed opinion that I am a bad influence for Burd, or something of the sort."

"Well, aren't you?" asked his sister, maliciously, adding quickly, as Burd seemed about to depart: "Oh, let me go along, Burd. I feel a severe attack of curiosity coming on. I must meet Aunt Emma."

"All right, come on—but your blood be upon your own head," warned Burd, with a grin.

After they had gone Jessie and Darry looked at each other and laughed.

"I am almost as curious as Amy to meet Aunt Emma," confessed Jessie. "She must be a very unusual person."

"She is kind-hearted and full of pep and fun, but as domineering as they make 'em," pronounced Darry. "Just the same, this trip to Forest Lodge is a mighty fine idea. I prophesy we won't have a slow minute while we are up there."

"How do we go, and when?" asked Jessie, with a mounting impatience to start on this adventure.

"As soon as you girls are ready, I suppose," returned Darry. "And as for our means of transportation, I gather from what Burd has let drop that we will drive up in Miss Alling's car—Aunt Emma driving," he finished, with a chuckle.

"Well, as long as Aunt Emma doesn't try to put up our radio set for us, we won't complain," laughed Jessie.

CHAPTER III

HENRIETTA

"SPEAKING of radio," Jessie said suddenly, the matter of the five-dollar bill coming to her mind, "have you heard anything about the circulation of counterfeit money, Darry?"

The latter shook his head and looked surprised. Jessie told him of the special radio announcement that had come to them the night before and of their subsequent finding that the five-dollar bill in Amy's possession was a counterfeit.

Darry listened with interest, but his chief concern seemed to be for Amy and the loss of her five dollars.

"Hard luck," he laughed. "Now she will have to do without George Washington sundaes for the next six months to make up."

"But the poor girl who gave her that five-dollar bill——"

"Poor girl!" exploded Darry, sitting up straight in his seat to stare at Jessie in astonishment. "I am used to your kind heart, Jess, but this is more than I could expect, even of you. Why pity a girl

who passes a counterfeit bill? She probably is one of a gang of counterfeiters."

"Oh, I should hate to believe that," said Jessie, quickly. "Somehow, she didn't look exactly dishonest."

"Yet she gave you—or Amy, rather—a counterfeit bill in exchange for five good ones," Darry argued. "That doesn't seem exactly honest, you know."

"Just the same, I don't intend to believe any one guilty until the guilt is proved," said Jessie, stoutly, and Darry, from the superior heights of his age, bent upon her a tolerant smile. Despite his slightly patronizing manner, Darry really regarded this chum of Amy's as one of the squarest, most companionable girls he knew. For her age, he conceded, magnanimously, she sure was a wonder!

"All right," he said. "Believe anything you like. And now, to change the subject to something more pleasant, Miss Alling told Burd that you girls would set the time to go; so, just when will you and Amy be ready for the trip to Forest Lodge?"

That, indeed, was the all-important question to the Radio Girls in the days that followed. Although they had numerous costumes for all occasions, they suddenly discovered that their wardrobes contained nothing that was really suit-

able for a vacation in a real, honest-to-goodness forest. This sad state of affairs, they decided unanimously, must be remedied immediately.

"Because one cannot possibly have a good time," Amy had argued, flippantly, "until one has the proper kind of clothes."

"It will be a dreadful bore to have to go shopping just now," said Jessie, who was impatient of anything that would delay the wonderful trip. "But if we must, we must."

"You always have such a clear way of putting things, honey," said Amy, irrepressibly. "And, oh, I saw the darlingest sports suits and things in Letterblair's window."

Letterblair's was a fashionable shop in the downtown district of New Melford where the girls and their mothers did most of their shopping. It was from this shop that Jessie had won a beautiful sports coat, offered as a prize to the girl in New Melford who could think up the cleverest and most unique idea for a charitable bazaar that was to be held on the lawn of the Norwood estate. Jessie's idea—the prize one—had been the devoting of one "concession" on the bazaar grounds to radio. The radio tent had been a tremendous success and, oh, how Jessie had enjoyed wearing that sports coat!

So now it was to Letterblair's that they went

in search of suitable apparel for this newest outing.

On the way to town they determined to stop and see Nell Stanley. Although they intended to urge her to accompany them on their trip to Forest Lodge, they had very little hope that she would be able to go.

Nell was the eldest daughter of the Reverend Doctor Stanley, a minister much beloved in New Melford. "The Reverend," as Nell affectionately called him, was a widower with four children, three younger than Nell. Although the income of the Stanley family was small, Nell managed wonderfully. Strong, healthy and capable, the young girl presided cheerfully over the parsonage and cared for her two younger brothers and her little sister, to whom she was elder sister and mother as well.

Because of her many responsibilities, it was only upon rare occasions that Nell could share in the fun of the other two girls. But, in spite of all this and hard as her life might seem to some, no one had ever heard Nell Stanley complain.

Nell herself greeted them as they came up to the parsonage. She was wearing a clean gingham dress and a dust cap and her handsome face was shining with health and hard work.

"Hello!" she cried gayly. "You two look like conspirators. Come in if you can find room," she

invited, leading the way into the cluttered front room of the parsonage. "Sally and the two boys muss things up more quickly than I can straighten them out, I think."

Nell listened sympathetically while the two girls told her of the trip to Forest Lodge, but shook her head regretfully when they said Miss Alling wanted her to accompany them.

"I don't see how I could manage it," she said, adding thoughtfully: "Though I might get Mrs. Tompkins to take care of the children and keep house——"

"Nell, you have a wonderful mind," said Amy, with conviction. "Mrs. Tompkins was the very person I was about to suggest!"

"I suppose the children would run wild," said Nell, hesitating.

"Let 'em. It would do them good for two weeks," said Amy.

"Nothing very bad could happen in that short time," Jessie added, pleadingly. "And, Nell, we would have such fun."

"Don't you suppose I know it?" retorted Nell, longingly. But she added, as she picked up a few of the scattered playthings in an attempt to restore the room to order: "I will ask the Reverend about it, anyway; and if I can get Mrs. Tompkins I may go with you yet. Now run along downtown like good children. And you might bring us some

ice-cream cones on the way back. The young ones would appreciate it particularly."

The girls agreed gayly, after winning from her a promise that she would come over some evening soon and "listen in" with them.

"And bring Fol with you," Amy added, as they went off. "He is a rather nice boy, considering his age."

In answer to this sally Nell laughed good-naturedly and made a face at Amy, an action—and Nell herself would have been the first to admit it—that was not at all a good example to set her ever-watchful and imitative little sister, Sally.

Once at Letterblair's, the girls discovered numerous other needs which had not occurred to them before, and it was past noon when they had successfully finished their shopping.

"Now for home and lunch. Jess, I have an idea—" Amy paused and regarded her chum meditatively. "Why not run into that darling little new restaurant down the street and have a bite to eat there? It will be a lark."

"Suppose we do," agreed Jessie. "I feel as though I would not be able to walk home without partaking of some nourishment first."

"I declare, it is late," said Amy, as she glanced from the store clock to her wrist watch. "If I had had any notion you were going to keep me so long

in this place, Jess Norwood, I would not have let you come with me."

"I like that!" laughed Jessie. "Especially since I have been waiting for you to get through for the past half hour."

"So are the righteous slandered," sighed Amy. "My friends have formed the habit of putting all the blame upon my frail shoulders— Hello, what have we here?"

She brought up short just outside the door of the shop and Jessie, following hurriedly, nearly ran into her.

"Why the sudden halt?" she inquired. And just then came a shriek, whether of joy or anguish it would have been hard to tell.

The next moment a small cyclone flung itself upon Jessie and held on to her, still shrieking— much to the delight of the passersby.

"Help, call out the reserves!" chortled Amy, her voice choked with laughter, while Jessie tried vainly to disengage herself from the clutches of the small cyclone. "Henrietta Haney, do stop that shrieking. Oh—oh, you will be the death of me, yet!"

By this time Jessie had been able to push her small assailant away from her, and, by holding very tightly to a pair of waving arms, found it possible to look into a small pointed face upon which every freckle stood forth.

"Henrietta Haney—Hen," admonished Jessie, with what severity the occasion permitted. "Do stop making so much noise, my dear. Why, everybody is looking at us."

"Well," said this surprising child, "I shouldn't mind their lookin', if I was you, Miss Jessie. Ma Foley always says no amount of lookin' ever hurt no one."

Jessie shot a helpless look at her chum, who was convulsed with mirth. Little Henrietta Haney, who had first introduced herself to the Radio Girls as a little waif from Dogtown—a down-at-heel district encroaching upon Roselawn—in search of her missing cousin, Bertha Blair, had since figured largely in their adventures. Owing to the interest of Mr. Norwood and Mr. Drew—both lawyers—the little girl had recently come into possession of part of Station Island. Henrietta, or "Hen," as she was familiarly called, was inordinately proud of her inheritance and seldom overlooked an opportunity to make reference to "her island."

Now Jessie and Amy moved the child to a less conspicuous spot and questioned her concerning her presence there.

"You surely did not come to New Melford all alone, Hen," said Jessie, in concern, for she really would not have been greatly surprised at anything

the wild child might do. "Isn't somebody with you?"

"Well, Bertha come with me," said the child, complacently; "but I left her."

"You what?" gasped Amy.

"I left her," repeated Hen, patiently. "We was comin' along, and all of a sudden I looks over and sees you and Miss Jessie and I just run through the crowd and left Bertha. I didn't knock over more than one person, either," she finished proudly. "And he was a little fat boy it didn't hurt none."

"It only goes to show there is good in everything, even fat," cried Amy, in a strangled voice, and even Jessie had to smile.

"And you haven't the least idea where Bertha is now?" questioned Jessie, searching the passing crowds for a familiar face.

"Oh, she'll turn up, Miss Jessie. She always does," said the child, confidently, adding with the first trace of anxiety she had exhibited: "But I hope she don't take too long. I got an awful ache where my tummy is. I'm gettin' hungry, I guess."

Amy went off into a fresh paroxysm of mirth while Jessie questioned the child closely as to the exact location of Bertha and herself when the little girl had first seen the two Radio Girls. Being able to extract but the vaguest information

from Hen, Jessie came to the conclusion that the only sensible thing to do was to wait just where they were until Bertha found them.

"It was very naughty of you to run away so, Henrietta," she scolded gently. "I hope you will never do a thing like that again."

"But, Miss Jessie!" the child protested, with wide-eyed surprise, "if I hadn't run away from Bertha I couldn't have caught you. I just had to run away."

At this logic Jessie shook her head helplessly while Amy regarded the remarkable child with unfeigned delight. As a matter of fact, Henrietta Haney was a perpetual joy to the fun-loving Amy—"better than a box seat at the circus," she herself expressed it.

"There's Bertha now!" shrieked the child, suddenly, and made another wild dash through the crowd, bumping into half a dozen indignant pedestrians as she went.

Amy, watching this progress with delight, chuckled softly.

"Thank goodness she is in Bertha's charge, not ours!" she said.

CHAPTER IV

AN ACCUSATION

BERTHA BLAIR had been at one time a mystery to the Radio Girls. A witness in a very important law case being tried by Mr. Norwood, she had been spirited off by unscrupulous persons and kept in captivity in order that her testimony might not be forthcoming.

How the girl managed to reach a sending set in the tower of the old house where she was kept captive and send out a cry for help over the airways, and how the Radio Girls heard the cry for help over their own receiving set and hurried to the rescue, formed an incident of thrilling interest. Later, this same Bertha Blair had been revealed to the girls as the niece of Mr. Blair, superintendent of the Stratford Electric Company.

At that moment Jessie saw Bertha coming toward them, holding the freckle-faced child by the arm and looking decidedly angry and out of sorts.

"Henrietta is certainly ruining my disposition," was her greeting to the two sympathetic girls. "I never know where she is from one moment to

the next. I would rather take a nest of hornets shopping than Hen."

"That seems kind of foolish, Bertha," remarked the strange child, gravely. "'Cause, you know, hornets don't need clothes near as much as me!"

Seeing that Amy was about to go into another paroxysm of mirth, Jessie hastily suggested lunch, a suggestion received with relief by Bertha and exuberance by Henrietta.

"Miss Jessie seems to know just the sort of thing a body wants," remarked the child, and Bertha, looking at Jessie, smiled.

"I really don't know what I shall do with her," she said, in a low tone, as, after Jessie and Amy had each telephoned that they would stay in town for lunch, they all walked toward the restaurant. "She used to be bad enough, that's a fact, but now there is no doing anything with her. Since she found out she owns that island——"

"I own a island, I own a island, I own a island," chanted the child, catching the last part of Bertha's low-spoken sentence. "I own a island, I own a——" But the last words had risen to so shrill a tone that people were glancing curiously at them and Jessie felt called upon to interfere.

"Even if you do own an island, or part of one," she said gently, "you don't need to tell everybody about it, dear."

"Well," said the child, wrinkling up her funny little nose, "I don't see why I shouldn't tell everybody as long as it ain't nothin' to be ashamed about."

"Oh, Henrietta, Henrietta!" laughed Amy, gleefully. "How dull this life would be without you!"

"Yes'm," agreed Henrietta, dutifully.

Bertha explained her presence in New Melford and then asked the girls why they had come downtown. When they told her about the proposed trip to Forest Lodge little Henrietta's face fell woefully.

"Then I won't get to see you for two whole weeks," mourned the little girl. But she soon added, with a sudden brightness of countenance: "I don't suppose it would be noways possible to take me along, would it?"

"I am afraid not, dear," said Jessie, slipping an arm about the wistful little thing while Amy stifled a laugh at thought of what the boys would say if they proposed "ringing little Hen in on the trip." "You will have to be at hand, anyway," she added with sudden inspiration, "in case anything comes up about your island."

Little Hen's face immediately lost all trace of wistfulness. Her small countenance assumed the expression of importance it always wore when any one mentioned "her island."

"That's so, Miss Jessie," she agreed gravely. "I just couldn't go and leave my island."

Henrietta's appetite had long been a marvel to the girls, but on this occasion it seemed to them she put to shame all previous records.

However, the girls noticed with approval—for they were really fond of the wild little thing—that Henrietta's arms and legs had lost somewhat their resemblance to very thin broomsticks. Prosperity was agreeing with the child. She was actually taking on flesh.

The girls remarked this aloud, and to their surprise Henrietta looked more worried than pleased.

"I don't know what I would do if I was to get fat like Mrs. Foley," she complained. "Mrs. Foley always said she was skinny just like me when she was a kid, and she didn't begin to put on flesh till she was forty. Just think, if I was to get fat like her, I couldn't never wear no more stylish clo'es!" and she gazed at the girls with tragic eyes.

"You are right, you couldn't!" laughed Amy, adding in an undertone to Jessie, "Just imagine Mrs. Foley in a coat suit!"

As they started to leave the restaurant, Amy suddenly turned and made as though she would retrace her steps.

"What's the matter?" asked Henrietta, solicitously. "See a snake or somethin'?"

"Something lots worse," returned Amy, with a giggle, and pointed to a group of girls who had just turned the corner and were coming toward them. "Here come Belle Ringold and Sally, Jess. Can't we dive into a hole somewhere until they get past?"

"Too late," sighed Jessie, with a sure knowledge of unpleasantness to come. "If we had only known we could have stayed in the restaurant and avoided them. Well, come along. We can't get away from them now."

Belle Ringold and Sally Moon were two very unpleasant girls whom most of the people in New Melford disliked intensely. Belle and Sally had few friends, and those only the kind whose friendship can be bought with money and good times.

Because Jessie and Amy, on the other hand, were popular with their townspeople and belonged to the class of girls who "do something," Belle and Sally centered their spleen upon them, and the girls rarely met but what unpleasant words were passed. For that reason Jessie and Amy avoided the unpleasant girls whenever it was possible to do so. Now, however, it seemed that a meeting was inevitable.

Jessie and Amy, with Bertha and Hen beside

them, quickened their pace in order to pass Belle Ringold and her "crowd" as soon as possible.

It was plain that Belle welcomed the meeting as much as the other girls disliked it, for quarreling, especially with such foes as Jessie and Amy, was the breath of life to her. So, instead of stepping aside to let them pass, she stopped directly in front of them, making it impossible for them to get by without walking into the street.

Jessie clasped little Hen's hand tightly in her own, for the child hated Belle Ringold with a consuming hatred and was accustomed to declare this feeling with appalling frankness. Even now, upon stealing a sidewise glance at her, Jessie could see that the child was bristling like a ruffled hen.

"Well, it is all very well for you to look so innocent, you two," cried Belle Ringold, charging hotly into the fray. "But perhaps you wouldn't if you knew what I know about you."

"Anything new?" queried Amy, with deceptive sweetness.

"Oh, nothing much," declared Belle, with a toss of her head. "Only a little thing, like passing counterfeit bills!"

CHAPTER V

TO THE RESCUE

THIS charge was so absolutely from a clear sky that the Radio Girls remained motionless for a moment, staring incredulously at the slanderer and her smirking companion. They were thunderstruck. It seemed impossible that even Belle Ringold should have said such a thing to them.

It was little Hen who recovered first, and with a shrill shriek of rage she charged to the attack.

"You horrid old thing!" she cried, one hand clenched and making frantic gestures in the air while the other tugged wildly in a vain attempt to free itself from Jessie's grip upon it. "You know that's a wicked fib, you do! That's why you said it! Oh, just wait till I get at you! Oh—oh——" Jessie's hand closed firmly over her mouth, choking off the furious words.

"Stop it, Henrietta!" she commanded. "You only make it worse by talking like that. Come on, Amy, let's get away from here."

"Going to meet Darry and Burd, I suppose," sneered Belle, not moving from the path.

"I think it is simply disgraceful—" added the sharp voice of Sally Moon, who could always be depended upon to back up the girl she fawned upon, "I think it is a shame the way you kids run after those two boys——"

"Especially since one of them happens to be my brother," said Amy, disgustedly. "Really, you girls are too absurd."

Seeing that Belle and Sally were just warming up to a fresh display of rudeness and knowing that Amy would soon lose her temper completely, Jessie started once more to pass Belle. The latter did not budge an inch, but looked at Jessie with such sneering disdain that even her mild temper gave way to exasperation.

"Are you going to let me pass, Belle Ringold?" she asked, in a low tone.

"I would like to know why I should," retorted the other girl, with an impudent toss of her head. "I don't see why I should get out of the way for a person who passes counterfeit bills. As a matter of fact, I expect them to get out of my way."

This was too much for Henrietta. Her face was red with fury and every freckle seemed to stand out upon it in a little brown blotch.

"Let me go, Miss Jessie! Just let me get at her! I'll scratch her eyes out, I will, the mean old thing!"

"Oh, Henrietta, Henrietta, hush. Don't say

any more." And while she tried to quiet the frantic child Jessie was conscious of Amy's voice, saying furiously:

"If you don't get out of the way and let us by, Belle Ringold, I'll——" But the threat was destined never to be finished.

There was the familiar growl of a motor horn, and as the girls looked around they saw the long low body of a touring car glide up to the curb and slow to a standstill. At the wheel was Burd Alling, a grin upon his cheery countenance, and in the tonneau was Darry and a lady whom the girls did not recognize. However, it was sufficient that, at that moment, they recognized Darry and Burd!

"Hello!" sang out the latter in a tone that showed he had estimated the situation perfectly. "Just in time to give you a lift, girls."

"What did I tell you?" snapped Belle, chagrined at the interruption. "Didn't I say they had a date with Darry and Burd?"

"Always tagging around," Sally Moon's voice reached them, as, without another word, the Radio girls, with Bertha and Henrietta in tow, turned toward the car. "Just like big kids——"

"Sorry we can't take you all, girls," called Burd to Belle and her crowd as he shifted the lever to low and the car moved slowly forward. "But, you see, we have a pretty good load as it is."

Darry introduced the strange lady as Miss Alling, "Aunt Emma," and the girls were delighted at this opportunity to make her acquaintance. The lady who was to chaperone them on the two weeks' jaunt to Forest Lodge was not at all the type of person that the inconsequential chatter of the boys had led them to expect.

To be sure, Miss Alling was thin, but hers was not the thinness of the dried-up spinster but rather the slenderness of an athletic woman who has kept herself physically fit. Her face was not handsome, but it was humorously alert and alive. Only around her mouth was a hint of the obstinacy for which Burd gave her credit.

Miss Alling was unmistakably enthusiastic about having the young folks with her at Forest Lodge, greeting them, as Burd had prophesied, as "gifts from heaven."

When they were nearing Nell Stanley's house, Jessie suddenly remembered the ice-cream cones they had promised to bring the young ones at the parsonage, and insisted that the boys stop long enough to pay a visit to a convenient candy store.

By that time little Hen was once more becoming an "empty void," or at least she declared herself to that effect, so the entire party trooped into the store for ice cream.

Later they stopped at the parsonage, but did not stay long as "Aunt Emma" Alling declared

herself in a tremendous hurry to get home. But Miss Alling met Nell and gave her in person a cordial invitation to join the party at Forest Lodge.

They saw Henrietta and Bertha to the very door of Mrs. Foley's shack in Dogtown (for Henrietta had evinced a strong desire to visit her former guardian), thereby arousing a good deal of interest and admiration on the part of the dwellers there. "My, but that Henrietta Haney had come up in the world, with her fine friends, and all. Her ownin' an island and visitin' on it and drivin' around in automobiles and the like. It's a credit to the neighborhood, she's getting to be." So tongues clacked and heads wagged in Dogtown.

As for Henrietta, you would have thought she was a princess at least by the way she held her freckled little nose to the sky upon entering the humble abode of Mrs. Foley.

The girls chuckled as the machine left the squalid streets of Dogtown and entered the exclusive residential district of Roselawn.

Jessie, Amy and Darry alighted at the gates of the Norwood estate, after gaining a promise from Miss Alling that she would visit Jessie the following evening and see the wireless set "in action."

When the car bearing Burd and "Aunt Emma"

had departed, the three young people turned with common consent toward the Norwood porch.

"What were Belle Ringold and Sally Moon up to?" queried Darry, as they reached the house. "They looked mad enough to bite nails when we first caught a glimpse of them."

"Humph, I guess we were the ones who should have looked mad," grumbled Amy as she settled herself comfortably in one of the big chairs on the porch. "Belle Ringold has called us just about every name in the calendar, but to-day she thought up a new one."

"She said we were passing counterfeit money," added Jessie, a shadow crossing her face as she thought of that accusation.

"She said what?" asked Darry again, staring. And when Jessie repeated Belle's words he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Well, that is rich!" he said, when he had recovered his breath.

"I don't see anything to laugh about," said Jessie, seriously. "We did not feel very much like laughing at the time."

"We were more inclined to throw bricks," agreed Amy. "Those girls are getting impossible, Darry!"

"I know they are," returned the young fellow, seriously. "But what I was wondering about," he added, curiously, "was how in time they got

hold of the information that Amy got stung with the counterfeit bill!"

"I don't know," said Amy, indifferently, adding with a chuckle: "I'm sure there is one girl who hasn't told about it, and that is the tall thin girl who gave the bill to me."

"I have been wondering about her a good deal," Jessie confessed. "I have a feeling that that girl is in trouble——"

"Well, if she isn't, she ought to be," returned Amy, vehemently. "Just think of my five dollars and you won't pity her so much."

"But she looked sick—almost as if she hadn't had enough to eat," insisted Jessie. "She was so tall and thin, and that white face against her coal black hair looked ghastly."

"Hold on a minute!" cried Darry, leaning forward and regarding Jessie intently. "Did this girl have blue eyes and unusually long, black lashes?"

"Good gracious, Darry! do you suppose we studied the length of the girl's lashes at a time like that?" drawled Amy. "Do have a heart!"

But Jessie had made an impatient gesture.

"She did have long lashes, Darry—black like her hair," she said, eagerly. With a low whistle Darry sank back in his chair.

"Gosh," he muttered, "I wonder if that could have been Link's sister!"

CHAPTER VI

THE START

"DARRY, what do you mean?" Jessie cried breathlessly. "Do you know this girl?"

Darry regarded her strangely for a moment, then replied with a forced gayety that did not deceive Jessie for a moment:

"How can I tell? You must admit your description has been meager. There are millions of girls in the United States with blue eyes and black eyelashes, I suppose."

"There are more in Ireland," murmured Amy.

From that time on, try as Jessie might to break his silence, Darry remained absolutely dumb on the subject of the girl who had given Amy the counterfeit bill. Jessie knew instinctively that this very silence meant that he knew—or suspected—a great deal more than he wished to tell about this girl, and in exact proportion as his silence lengthened, her curiosity increased. She was piqued, too, to think that Darry could be so secretive. He had always seemed so frank and open in all his actions. He must, she decided unwillingly, think a great deal of this girl to be so careful to shield

her from curiosity—even the kindest and best intentioned curiosity like hers.

The day after their meeting, Miss Alling kept her promise to the girls and appeared at the Norwood home promptly at eight o'clock to "listen in" on the wonders of Jessie's radio set.

She came, she frankly admitted, in a skeptical mood, for she could not bring herself to believe that two such young girls could erect with any degree of success so complicated an apparatus as a radio receiving set. Miss Alling belonged to the type of person who, while believing she can do nearly everything herself, has a good-natured contempt for the accomplishments of most of her sex.

However, the girls proved to her that such a feat was indeed possible, and, after looking the radio set over, Miss Alling pronounced herself converted.

During the course of the evening Nell Stanley appeared, bringing with her Folsom Duckworth, a high school boy all the others knew well.

"I fixed it up at home so that I can go to Forest Lodge with you," said Nell.

"If you three girls are going, what's the matter with having Fol along?" suggested Burd. "That will make it three and three."

"Yes, do come with us," urged Miss Alling cordially. And so, after some talking, it was

arranged. The young folks all liked Fol, even though he was rather of the quiet sort.

After that the whole party grew merry at the thought of the good times ahead. As a fine orchestra was now giving dance music over the radio, a loud speaker was adjusted and soon one couple after another got up to dance.

Burd's Aunt Emma, like all athletic women, danced wonderfully well, and soon the boys were "cutting in" on her dances.

"She is more popular than us—I should say we—young things," Amy whispered gleefully in Jessie's ear. "I will never be afraid of getting old again, after this."

"I think she is wonderful," returned Jessie, in a low tone. "After this I am prepared to love even her obstinacy!"

Altogether, the party was a huge success and there was not one among them more sorry than Miss Alling when the lateness of the hour forced it to break up.

"May I come again?" she asked of Mrs. Norwood, as the latter accompanied her to the door.

"My dear, I wish you would," returned Mrs. Norwood, with genuine cordiality. "I haven't felt so young for years!"

"And now," sighed Jessie, after the last one—even Amy—had gone and she was left alone with her radio set, "to-morrow I shall have to take

you all down, you dear old thing, wires and everything, and pack you up neatly so that you can go with us up to Forest Lodge. I wonder if you will like the trip as well as we expect to. Oh, radio, dear, we are going to have a lovely time!"

Then, almost before they realized it, the morning of departure had come. The radio set had been dismantled skilfully by Jessie and Amy and was ready for its forty-odd mile trip up into the mountains.

Besides the radio apparatus, the girls carried very little luggage. Since they were to make the journey in Miss Alling's touring car—with the exception of the three boys, who were to "tag along after them" in Darry's roadster—it would be necessary to travel as light as possible.

"Anyway," Amy had remarked philosophically, "we'll practically live in our outing suits during the two weeks and we'll need very little else in the way of clothing."

"Except our bathing suits," Jessie had laughingly reminded her. "Burd says that the lodge is right on the shore of Lake Towako, you know, and there ought to be plenty of chances for fine swimming."

The morning of departure dawned gloriously bright. Jessie, waiting with her mother on the porch, heard the roar of an exhaust, and the next moment saw Darry's black roadster leave the

garage on the Drew place and back down the drive into the broad, shaded boulevard.

This was about ten o'clock. Mr. Norwood, who was taking a half-holiday, came out, morning paper in hand, to say good-bye to his daughter.

"Be a good girl and an honor to the Norwood name," he said, with a twinkle in his eye, and Jessie flung her arms about his neck and gave him a bear-hug.

"You know I always am, Daddy Norwood," she cried gayly. "Good-bye, Momsey dearest. Write to me, won't you? I only wish you were coming too." She was off down the walk, waving her hand gayly to Darry and Amy, who were already "honking" for her before the gate.

"Here come Burd and Aunt Emma now," Amy called out to her, pointing down the road.

Miss Alling was driving at a merry pace, Burd lounging in the seat beside her with hands folded conspicuously on his chest. In a moment the big car drew up beside the little roadster.

"Glad to see you ready, girls," said Aunt Emma, briskly. "Hop out, Burd, and you and Darry pile the luggage in the tonneau. I have an old salt's nose for a storm, and I scent one brewing in the distance. The sooner we get started, the better it will be for all of us."

Spurred on by this injunction, the boys in a short time had everything ready for the start.

"We'll have to stop and pick up Fol and Nell," Jessie reminded them. "But that won't take long if they are only ready for us."

"Let's hope they'll be," returned Darry, adding, as he stepped on the starter: "Lead on, Miss Alling. We can do no better than follow in your footsteps."

Nell and Fol were waiting on the porch of the parsonage, and so they met no delay there. The weather was ideal for such a trip, and, as Miss Alling said, barring accidents, there was no reason why they should not reach Forest Lodge on Lake Towako in time for lunch.

Aunt Emma was an excellent driver, and the handsome car covered mile after mile of macadam road with a smooth, softly-purring motion that was tonic to the action-loving girls. Nell sat beside Miss Alling, and Amy and Jessie occupied the roomy tonneau which seemed not in the least cluttered by the luggage that had been piled in it.

"Oh, isn't this air wonderful?" sighed Jessie, happily, after a time.

"And the scenery!" murmured Amy. "Look at that mountain rising straight ahead of us. Did you ever see anything more glorious?"

"There is a bridge at the foot of this hill," Aunt Emma threw over her shoulder. "Wait till you see the view from there."

For some time they had been traveling straight

up into the mountains. The road had been almost one steady ascent. Now, however, the road dipped sharply, and the car—Aunt Emma rarely used any brake but the brake pedal, even on the steepest hills—slid downward with dizzy speed.

"Good gracious, but this is reckless!" Amy gasped.

Just then Jessie suddenly seized her arm in a grip that hurt.

"Amy, look! Look!" she screamed. "Right ahead of us! The bridge is down!"

CHAPTER VII

THE WRECKED BRIDGE

"WE'LL go into the river!" gasped Nell. "We can never stop!" came from Amy. "Oh, what shall we do?"

"Keep your seats, girls. Don't try to jump out," came crisply from Miss Alling. "Hold tight, all of you!"

The bridge spanning a small river at the foot of the hill had collapsed, leaving an unprotected embankment and a four-foot drop to the water below. At the rate of speed at which the car was going, it seemed as though nothing short of a miracle could prevent a tragedy.

The girls clutched each other frantically, and Miss Alling's fingers tightened on the wheel. With swift presence of mind the lady swerved the big car from the road, driving it into the woods, crashing recklessly through bushes and undergrowth. They had missed the drop to the river by the narrowest of margins.

Behind them they heard Darry cry out, heard another car crash through the bushes. Their own car, still commanded resolutely by Miss Alling,

bumped along for several yards, careening drunkenly over boulders and bushes in its path, bringing up finally in about a foot of water and soft oozing mud. They had met the stream again where it changed its course and wandered through the forest.

Amy released her tense grip upon Jessie's arm and straightened up. From the front seat there came a sound between a sob and a laugh. The author of the sound was Nell. Miss Alling herself seemed not in the least perturbed.

"Nasty business," she said disgustedly, as she eased herself from behind the wheel and felt for a footing in the wet grass. "Might know I would end up in a mud hole like this. Well, I guess there is nothing for it but for us all to get out and push. Give you girls an appetite for lunch," she added, with a chuckle.

"Just now I feel as though I would never be able to eat again," remarked Nell, the usually calm and collected.

They heard the boys calling to them and the next moment Burd, Darry and Fol appeared, looking extremely anxious.

"Why the lengthy faces?" cried Amy. "You needn't look as if we had already shuffled off this mortal coil. Cheer up, boys, there is lots of kick in us yet."

"What shocking slang," reproved Jessie, with

a chuckle. "And just when you should be making a good impression upon Miss Alling, and everything."

"My dear," spoke up Aunt Emma absently, "if I never had anything worse than slang to worry about, I should be a very lucky woman. This car! Now I ask you! Just look at it! Sunk a foot deep in mud and water!"

"It is a rather sorry-looking spectacle," agreed Burd, adding with a grin: "But it would be looking a heap worse if it had gone over that embankment."

"So should we," replied Jessie, with a forced laugh.

"The appearance of none of us is likely to be improved at once," Miss Alling informed him, with a merry twinkle in her eyes. "You will probably be liberally spattered with mud—and bad temper—before we get this car on the state highway again. We'll have to ford the river."

"Ford the river!" repeated Jessie, wonderingly. "Is it shallow enough for that?"

"That remains for us to find out," returned Miss Alling. "I believe there is a comparatively shallow place a little further on through the woods, though."

"Get a car through this jungle!" groaned Darry. "From where I sit it looks as impenetrable as an African forest."

"Well, would you rather sit here and look at each other—or go back home?" asked Miss Alling, and at this suggestion, which smacked of a threat, the Radio Girls were stirred to sudden action.

"I should say we don't want to go home!" said Jessie, stoutly. "We are going to ford this river if there is a place where it is less than four feet deep. Tell us what to do, Miss Alling, and we will do it."

Aunt Emma looked at her approvingly.

"Good!" she said. "That is the kind of talk I like."

"The first thing to do is to get this car backed out of the mud, I guess," suggested Nell, thoughtfully, and Aunt Emma nodded briskly.

"Right you are," she said. "Bring up the roadster, Darry. And you two boys," turning to Burd and Fol, "can help me get some rope from the car. The rest of you," she added to the girls, "will have to push!"

Darry brought up the little roadster, puffing and snorting, to within a few feet of the big car. By this time Burd and Fol had succeeded in finding a piece of good stout rope under the back seat of the touring car. It took them only a short time, working together, to fasten the big car securely to the little one.

"Puts your little bus on its metal, sure enough,

Darry," Burd remarked. "It will have to pull some to get this big jumbo free."

"Huh!" cried Aunt Emma, hopping nimbly into the big car and seizing the wheel with determination, "this big jumbo, as you call it, has a mighty fine engine. I reckon the strain won't come altogether on Darry's roadster."

But the undertaking, simple as it had seemed in the beginning, assumed gigantic proportions as the work progressed. The big car, in reverse, snorted and roared and puffed—and that was all. The wheels could get no purchase in the slimy mud. They slid and skidded and accomplished nothing.

The little roadster, doing its gallant best, was at a disadvantage also, for the ground was wet and slippery, being sodden because of a recent storm. Also, the shore sloped sharply down to the edge of the stream, so that the roadster was trying to carry its heavy load up grade.

The girls and boys put their shoulders to the car and pushed with all their might, but still it would not budge.

"Well, I guess we are doomed to spend the rest of our natural lives in this spot," said Amy, at last, stopping to wipe the perspiration from her brow. "In the last ten minutes we have not moved the fraction of an inch. Startling speed."

"I have an idea," cried Jessie, suddenly, as the

rest stopped for a moment's breathing spell. "Why can't we get that big log over there and put it in front of the wheels of the roadster. That would keep the car from slipping backward, anyway."

"Might try it," agreed Burd, grudgingly. "But I don't suppose it will do much good. What we need is a team of good farm horses," he added ruefully.

However, Jessie's idea of the log did work surprisingly well. It not only prevented the roadster from slipping, but gave it something to push against when starting in reverse.

"Now, all together!" cried Jessie, as she once more leaned all her weight against the car. "It will have to come this time. One, two, three—go!"

There was the staccato roar of the engine, and with all their strength Jessie and Amy and Nell and the two boys, leaned against the car.

The roadster, insured against slipping by the log, pulled the rope taut. Slowly, but steadily and surely, the big car crept backward. The mud and slime loosed its hold upon the wheels. A moment more, and the big machine had reached solid ground. The wheels dug savagely into it, sending the car backward with such force that Miss Alling was forced to bear down heavily

upon the brake to prevent a smash with Darry's car.

"Hooray, the day is saved!" shouted Burd. Then he added, with a grin, as he looked at Jessie: "And it was Jessie's log that saved it."

"Who cares whose log it was—we're out! That's the big thing!" returned Jessie.

"Sure thing, we're out!" cried Amy. "Three cheers, boys and girls! One—two—three——"

The cheers were given, Miss Alling adding her voice to the six more youthful, and more vociferous, ones.

CHAPTER VIII

RISKY BUSINESS

"AND now to cross the river!" said Amy.

"Out of the frying pan into the fire," laughed Nell. "We just succeed in getting out of the river, and we immediately make plans for getting into it again."

"Does seem rather foolish, doesn't it?" agreed Jessie. "However, we can only hope that the river bottom isn't mud all the way."

"It is not," Miss Alling assured her, as the boys unfastened the rope that bound the two cars together. "As the stream becomes more shallow the river bed becomes more pebbly. I really think we won't have any trouble getting across."

The knots in the rope that had bound the two cars together had been drawn taut by the strain upon them and the unfastening of the knots required time and patience. Miss Alling insisted that the rope should not be cut.

"We never can tell when we may need the rope again," she reminded them. "Better spend a little

extra time just now than lose a good deal later on."

At last the final knot was untied, the rope stowed away in the tonneau awaiting the next emergency, and they were ready for the start. In the meantime Darry had gone back and posted a warning on the road leading to the broken bridge.

"Where do we go from here, boys—or rather, Aunt Em?" queried Burd, as the boys climbed back into the roadster. "We let you take the lead before, and I suppose we shall have to again. Though I don't know whether we should," he added judicially, "after the place you led us to."

"Better here than into the river," retorted Miss Alling, and stepped on the starter.

It was necessary for them to proceed at a snail's pace, for, though there were traces of an old wagon road following the banks of the stream at this point, the woodland was dense with vines and undergrowth, and the road was fairly overgrown with rank grass and bushes.

It seemed an endless time to the impatient girls before Miss Alling stopped the car and, pointing out toward the stream, declared that she was confident they would be able to cross it at that point.

They got out to have a closer look at the water, and Darry, having stopped his car a few feet

behind them, joined them with Fol and Burd.

"All set for the big act?" asked Darry, and Miss Alling nodded thoughtfully. They had reached the water, and at the point where the stream encroached upon the shore it was only a few inches deep. Also, the bottom was, as Miss Alling had prophesied, hard and dotted with small boulders and rocks.

"Pretty rough going, but a good sight better than mud, at that," was Fol's verdict. "I vote we get started."

"But how do you know the stream is fordable at this point?" asked Darry.

Miss Alling had started back toward the cars, evidently intent upon following Fol's suggestion without delay, but at Darry's question she turned and looked at him squarely.

"My dear boy, I *don't* know," she told him. "The world is full of gambles. This is one of them."

"I don't want to gamble," wailed Amy, as they followed Aunt Emma. "I only want to live. Jessie, I give you my word I feel ten perfectly good years of my life slipping away."

"I have heard that people actually do die of fright sometimes," said Jessie, cheerfully, and Amy shot her a reproachful glance.

"Mean old thing," she said. "I don't believe you are frightened in the least, Jessie Norwood."

"Why should I be?" returned Jessie, with a laugh. "It isn't as though we hadn't been close to drowning before. Darry's yacht, the *Marigold,* for instance."

"Well, just because we nearly drowned once isn't to say that I ought to enjoy it the second time," grumbled Amy. The next moment she gripped Jessie's arm. Miss Alling had turned the car and had headed it straight toward the river.

"Here goes," sang out Nell. "Hold your hats, everybody!"

The water swished about the wheels as the car pushed forward, and Amy's grip upon her chum tightened.

"In just about a minute we are due to stumble into a hole," she said, and Jessie giggled.

"Cars don't stumble," she said. "They plunge. If you are not careful I will tell Miss Seymour on you."

"O-oh, there we go!" gasped Amy, shutting her eyes as the water swished up higher about the wheels. "Let me know when it reaches my chin. I shan't die without a struggle."

"Silly, open your eyes," laughed Jessie. "If you think you can drown in two feet of water, go ahead."

Luckily for them, the opposite shore was not steep, and the big car took the ascent with ease. Miss Alling stopped the car long enough to make

sure that the boys were following them safely, then turned about and headed back through the woods toward the roadway.

They were again on an old road running through the woods, but it was one seldom used and was filled with stumps and creeping vines, and they were once more forced to proceed at a crawl. But with the river successfully crossed, the girls did not chafe so much at the slow pace and were pleasantly surprised when at last the highway appeared through the trees.

Once upon this highway, they waited for the roadster to catch up to them. Somebody suggested that they have lunch before they went any further. The broken bridge had delayed them more than they realized, and Darry found upon consulting his watch that it was long past lunch time.

Miss Alling, however, insisted that they continue on for a few miles in an attempt to make up the time they had lost.

"We have a long way to go yet," she reminded them. "And the last part of the trip is by far the harder. We turn off from the main highway several miles away from Forest Lodge, and the lake road is steep and rocky. I have no notion," she ended decidedly, "of taking that road after dark."

The young folks reluctantly consented to go on although the basket lunch which Alma, the Nor-

wood's cook, had packed with dainties, was the cause of much yearning speculation on the part of the girls and boys. The lunch was one Alma had insisted on their taking along, saying there was no telling what a motor car might do or when it would get them to their journey's end.

The next hour passed uneventfully, and Miss Alling, as though to make up for every second of wasted time, burned up mile upon mile of smooth road beneath the wheels of her powerful car.

They came at last to a road marked: DETOUR —ROAD CLOSED FOR REPAIRS.

Miss Alling stopped the car so swiftly that the girls were thrown forward in their seats. As Amy afterward remarked, nothing save the luggage kept her and Jessie from being tossed over the heads of the two in front.

Their chaperone regarded the annoying sign with furrowed brow.

"I know this detour," she said, with a sigh. "It means a half dozen miles out of our way on a most disagreeable stretch of road. Now we surely will be late reaching Forest Lodge!"

"Well, if we are going to be late, anyway, we might as well eat," suggested Jessie, and Darry, who, with Fol and Burd, had strolled up to inspect the sign, seconded the suggestion with extreme heartiness. The others joined in and made

such a clamor that for the sake of peace their chaperone was forced to give in.

Besides, as she admitted later between bites of a chicken sandwich, she had been actually famished herself.

After the hamper had been emptied and they were on their way once more, the boys and girls found out that Aunt Emma had not exaggerated when she classed the detour as a most disagreeable stretch of road. It was all of that, as Burd remarked, and "then some."

They came at last to a village, a straggling, shabby little place with one main street, a shabby motion picture theater, and a few uninviting-looking stores.

"This is Gibbonsville, and it marks the end of the detour," said Miss Alling. "Just beyond here we come upon the lake road again."

"That is lucky," said Amy. "One more mile of that road, and I shouldn't have had a tight tooth in my head." Her voice died off vaguely. She had started forward in her seat, her gaze suddenly fixed and staring.

"What is it?" cried Jessie.

"There is that girl! The one who gave me the counterfeit bill!"

CHAPTER IX

ON THE HUNT

"OH, stop the car, Miss Alling, please!" cried Jessie, on impulse, and automatically Miss Alling responded.

The car slowed to a standstill before the store upon the porch of which Amy had seen the strange girl.

"She is gone, worst luck!" cried Amy, as she opened the car door and leaped to the ground. "Did you see the look she gave me, Jess?" she added, as her chum followed her and together they approached the store. "Just one long stare, and then the disappearing act."

"Oh, hush," cautioned Jessie, as she laid a hand upon the crazily-swung screen door at the entrance to the store. "She may be just inside, and we don't want her to know we are talking about her."

But the strange girl was not within, as Jessie and Amy soon found out, and a guarded questioning of the languid storekeeper brought forth no information as to her whereabouts.

There was a door at the rear of the store, and

to this Amy ran, opening it and peering out into the littered yard. Jessie followed more slowly, for she had no desire to arouse either the curiosity or the suspicion of the sleepy-eyed storekeeper.

Back of the small cleared space that served for a back yard and which was crammed with old packing boxes and rubbish of all kinds, was a vegetable garden and beyond that, the woods. If the strange girl had fled in this direction there would be scant chance of finding her.

Disappointed, the girls turned away and Jessie stopped to buy a box of crackers and some sorry-looking candy from the man behind the counter, who seemed as if about to be shocked into wakefulness by their peculiar actions.

"There was a stairway going up from the back of that store. I saw it," Amy said in a low tone to her chum, as they returned to their curious companions. "If that isn't the way that girl disappeared, then I am no good as a detective."

"We could hardly have gone up those stairs without being arrested for housebreaking," Jessie argued reasonably, but Amy shook her head.

"I would be almost willing to risk spending a night in the county jail for the pleasure of talking to that girl again," she said.

Nell and the three boys greeted them with curious questions when they returned and listened with interest when they told of their fruitless

search for the girl who had passed the counterfeit bill.

Darry was obviously excited and upset, and asked them so many questions that Amy finally snapped out at him with:

"For goodness' sake, Darry, we have told you all we know about four times over. Now, if you want to find out anything else, you will have to turn sleuth yourself."

"I intend to," retorted Darry, with decision adding, as he turned toward the store: "Excuse me for a few minutes, folks. I have a consuming curiosity to talk with the owner of this place."

The girls and boys looked after him until he had disappeared within the store, then exchanged curious glances.

"Darry sure seems all 'het up' over this girl," remarked Burd, with a chuckle. "Never knew him to take so much interest in a stranger before."

"Maybe he is in with the gang of counterfeiters," suggested Fol, grinning, "and is afraid this mysterious young thing may give him away."

"Here comes Darry now. Let him speak for himself," said Amy.

But Darry seemed to have no intention of speaking for himself or for any one else. He looked as black as a thundercloud as he flung down the steps, and had hardly a word to say in answer to their eager questions.

"I found out a good many things that don't help me any," he said, taking Burd and Fol by the arm and heading them back toward the roadster. "Let's get started. Something tells me we are wasting more time than is necessary."

The only one who agreed with him was Miss Alling. Mildly interested in the account of the counterfeit bill and the girl who had passed it, Aunt Emma was much more vitally concerned with the passage of time and that stretch of mountain road that they would have to cover at the end of their journey.

So as Darry herded the boys into the roadster she stepped on the starter and Jessie and Amy had no alternative but to climb hastily into the car before she released the brake and threw in the clutch.

Amy looked regretfully at the blank face of the store as they moved away.

"I have an idea there are just slathers of mystery surrounding that girl, Jess," she said, in a low tone. "I hate to go away and leave it all unsolved."

"Perhaps we can come back here some day before long," remarked Jessie, absently. Her mind was busy with the problem of Darry and his strange behavior. "Gibbonsville can't be such a very long drive from Forest Lodge."

"Humph, by the time we get back here that

girl will have had a dozen chances to escape."

"Provided she wants to escape," said Jessie, thoughtfully, and her chum looked at her in surprise.

"Why, of course she wants to escape! Isn't she a counterfeiter?"

"I don't know that and neither do you," retorted Jessie, to the further mystification of her friend.

"But she gave me a counterfeit bill!" Amy protested, with exasperation. "You saw her do it."

"That doesn't prove that she was dishonest," returned Jessie, earnestly, "any more than it's proof that you are dishonest because you happen to have a counterfeit bill in your possession."

"What are you two girls fighting about?" asked Nell, half-turning in her seat. "I feel as though I were missing all the fun."

"We aren't fighting," laughed Amy. "We are only calling each other names."

"As though that weren't the same thing!" retorted Nell. After a moment she added, curiously: "What do you suppose made Darry act the way he did? Does he know that girl, Amy?"

"Don't ask me! Did you ever hear of a brother telling his sister anything?" returned Amy, in an aggrieved tone that betrayed the fact that she, like Jessie, had attempted to "pump"

Darry on the subject of the strange girl and failed. "I suppose, like Belle Ringold, he thinks me a mere child and not worthy of his confidences," she added flippantly.

As they climbed farther up into the hills and the scenery became wilder and more picturesque, Miss Alling became expansive, recounting stories of people who lived in that locality and telling amusing anecdotes of her own experiences that kept the girls in gales of merriment.

It seemed only a short time to them before they turned off the main highway and entered the rough and narrow mountain road. In spite of the discomfort of that last part of the journey, the girls thoroughly enjoyed it.

Aunt Emma, intent upon her driving, relapsed once more into silence. Indeed, there were some spots along that road where she needed every atom of skill she possessed. At one point the narrow road hugged close to the side of the mountain while to the left of them the ground dropped sharply downward, disclosing a ravine some hundred feet in depth.

"Good it isn't raining," said Amy, as the car crawled cautiously along the perilous strip of road. "One skid, and we would be but a dim, faint memory. Look behind you, will you, Jess, dear, and see if the boys are still right side up?"

Jessie obeyed and reported that Darry was being cautious for once in his life.

At last they descended from the narrow road to one that led straight through the heart of the forest. Ahead of them through the trees the girls presently caught a glimpse of rippling water.

"Lake Towako," announced Nell, joyfully. "Doesn't it look pretty?"

"It is pretty," said Miss Alling, with conviction. "And my lodge commands a view of the prettiest part of it. There is the house to the right of us. Thank fortune we reached it before dark."

The girls saw a long, low, rambling building with many windows and an air of rusticity that was delightfully in keeping with the surroundings.

The front windows commanded a full view of the lake, which was charming with its irregular shore line and picturesque, verdure-clad islands.

A small dock jutted out into the water, and close by were racks bearing several bright-colored canoes. Beside the dock, bobbing gently on the serene water, were two rowboats.

"I can see where we don't spend much time on land," said Amy, as Miss Alling turned in back of the lodge and silenced the motor. "I feel the call of those canoes already."

"Lake Towako will be here to-morrow, and so

will the canoes," Aunt Emma reminded her, smiling. "I imagine we shall have enough to do to-night just to put the rooms in order. I wired Phrosy to come down here, but the deserted condition of the house leads me to believe that Phrosy has failed me."

"Who is Phrosy?" Jessie asked, but at that moment the door at the rear of the house opened and the entire breadth of the doorway was blocked by a towering black figure.

"Phrosy, why didn't you come out to meet us?" asked her mistress, severely. "I thought you had not come."

"Ah begs yo' pardon, Miss Alling, I sho' does," said the big black woman in a rich and mellow voice. "But Ah done think you was de ghosts fo' sure."

"Ghosts!" cried the girls, and Phrosy turned her solemn visage upon them.

"Dey comes f'om dat swamp," she said, and pointed with a shaking finger. "Dey does, as sho' as Ah lives."

CHAPTER X

GHOSTS

"NONSENSE, Phrosy, what a ridiculous thing to say."

Miss Alling's tone was sharp as she pushed past the colored woman into the house.

"But, Miss Emma, I done tell yo' Ah knows what Ah'm talkin' about," persisted Phrosy. "'Taint no 'magination. Ah done heered 'em screechin'."

"Well, suppose you light a lamp or two," Miss Alling suggested, adding dryly: "Ghosts don't like light, you know. Probably they will wait till we go to bed to bother us."

Phrosy groaned and the girls giggled nervously.

"Den I don't nebber go to bed no mo'e, Miss Emma," said the colored woman, while she went about lighting the rooms to a mellow cheerfulness.

"You could take a lamp to bed with you, Phrosy," suggested Amy.

"Wouldn't take dose ghosts more'n one second to put out dat light, li'l missy. An' den where'd Ah be?" she said darkly.

"What is this we hear about ghosts?" asked a laughing, masculine voice from the doorway, and the girls turned gleefully to greet the boys.

"Come on in, do," cried Jessie. "There is one attraction here that we didn't bargain on. Phrosy says there are ghosts in the swamp."

Miss Alling, who had been putting lamps in the other rooms, returned at that moment and confronted the black woman.

"Still talking ridiculous nonsense, are you, Phrosy?" she said severely. "Well, let me remind you that ghosts are not good to eat, and we are all very hungry after a long ride. I hope you followed my instructions and laid in a good stock of eatables."

"I done follow yo' instructions, Miss Emma," grumbled the black woman, as she moved toward the small lean-to that served for a kitchen. "I mos' always tries to do my duty, but Ah's goin' away f'om here fust thing in de mo'nin' sho' as mah name am Euphrosyne Black. Ah kin stand mos' anything, but Ah caint stand fo' ghosts."

"Phrosy, what is that you say?" cried Miss Alling, in a tone that brought the big black woman up short. "You don't mean to tell me you actually intend to leave here in the morning?"

"Yas'm, Ah sho' does," said Phrosy, firmly. "Ah stayed here las' night an' Ah gives you mah

word, Miss Emma, Ah nebber done close mah eyes."

"Come here to me, Euphrosyne Black," commanded Miss Alling, in a tone that proved her determined to get at the root of this nonsense. "What was it you heard last night, or thought you heard?"

"Ah done hear it wiv mah own ears, Miss Emma," said Phrosy, her voice quivering with suppressed emotion and her eyes rolling till there was scarcely anything visible but the white eyeball. "A screechin' an' a moanin' an' a wailin' like all de ghostes in de world was ober by dat swamp. It done make mah hair stand clear on end, Miss Emma. Ah'm tellin' you de truf."

"What did you do then?" asked Jessie.

"I bet I can tell you what she did," interrupted Burd, with a grin. "I bet she just took down one of these guns I see hanging on the walls and went gunning for the ghosts."

"Ah would need mo' dan a gun to kill a ghost, yassuh," said Phrosy, earnestly, and once more Miss Alling broke in impatiently.

"I suppose what you actually did was to put your head under the covers and shiver for the rest of the night," she said, and Phrosy nodded her head and rolled her eyes in admiration of this remarkable logic.

"Yas'm, dat's jest what Ah did. But Ah don't

expects to do it no mo'e," she added, with a return to stubbornness. "Sho as de mo'nin' comes, Ah done take de fust boat what leaves dis place."

"Phrosy, I do hope you won't be so foolish and unkind," said Miss Alling, resorting to argument and cajolery. "You know there are no such things as ghosts. And have you stopped to think how I could get along without you?"

"Ah's sho sorry, Miss Emma, but dis place ain't gwine see me no mo'e after de mo'nin'. If dat ghost stays, Ah gits."

Regretful, but obviously determined, Phrosy stalked off into the kitchen, having enjoyed the advantage of the last word.

The young folks exchanged amused glances, then looked at Aunt Emma. Her face was a study of conflicting emotions, but the most dominant among them seemed to be an intense irritation.

"That is what you have to suffer from being partial to black servants," she said, in a voice lowered so that it might not reach the ears of Euphrosyne Black. "They are so superstitious they carry their ghosts along with them. I don't know how I will ever manage if Phrosy leaves me."

"Where is this swamp where the ghosts live?" asked Amy.

"There is a swamp over there beyond the lake,"

responded Aunt Emma, waving her hand in an easterly direction. "It is a miserable, dreary place and is avoided by every one in the locality. I have heard that it can be crossed if one knows how to find the solid ground, but unless my life depended upon it I wouldn't care to try it myself."

"Dreary, you say, and deserted," murmured Amy, adding with an irrepressible chuckle: "Just the ideal spot for a ghost. I think I will have to visit this swamp before long."

"I think you had better be very careful how you visit in that neighborhood," retorted Miss Alling, briskly. "More than one person has gone to the swamp never to return."

"Oh, how thrilling," cried Amy. "That explains Phrosy's ghosts, doesn't it? Maybe she didn't imagine those noises after all."

"Good gracious, Amy, I wish you would stop," said Nell, with a shiver. "I declare, I feel creepy already."

"No wonder—listening to Phrosy's wild stories," said Miss Alling. "Suppose we change the subject. For instance, how do you like my lodge, now that you are here?"

The change of subject was a fortunate one, and it was not long before Phrosy's ghosts had been forgotten in the delight of inspecting the cozy interior of the lodge.

There was a combination living room and dining room opening off from the kitchen, and it was into this room that Phrosy had ushered them. By the light of the oil lamps they could make out the picturesque roughness of the raftered ceiling and side walls.

The walls were almost completely covered by handsome animal skins and rifles, and at one spot over the open fireplace depended the huge antlered head of a deer.

Woven rag rugs covered the rough boards of the floor, and at each side of the fireplace was a wooden settle. A large table surrounded by cushioned, comfortable chairs completed the furnishings of the room.

"All the comforts of home," said Darry, and grinned at Aunt Emma. "My, I am glad you invited us."

"You don't live here," retorted the lady. "The lodge isn't big enough to accommodate all of you, so I have commandeered a small cabin just back of us. It has only two rooms, but as you boys will probably spend most of your time here I guess the cabin will be large enough for you."

"They want to get rid of us! It is a put-up job!" complained Burd. "Imagine them giving us a two-room cabin and keeping the lodge all to themselves."

"It is the day of women," sighed Darry. "We

really should be thankful that they let us live at all."

Accompanied by the complaints of the boys and the flickering light of lanterns the girls inspected the rest of their quarters.

There were three bedrooms and a little closet-like affair that was Phrosy's room. The rooms were a fair size and contained comfortable beds, despite the fact that the walls and floors, like those of the living room, were rough and unplastered.

The girls noticed with pleasure—and a feeling of relief which they would not acknowledge even to each other—that the two rooms assigned to them by Miss Alling were connected by a door.

"One of us will have to sleep alone," Nell said in a low tone, as they followed Aunt Emma back to the living room. "I don't mind telling you that I would rather not."

"Why, Nell, don't tell me Phrosy's ghosts have got you scared," laughed Amy. "Didn't you hear Aunt Emma say there weren't no sech animal?"

However given to superstition Phrosy might be, there could be no discount on her ability as a cook. The dinner she prepared that night tasted like ambrosia and nectar to the famished young folks. It was with evident reluctance that the boys finally left the table and declared their intention of seeking their own quarters.

Aunt Emma and Phrosy escorted them to the cabin while the girls stood in the doorway and waved them good-bye.

"Oh," said Jessie, turning away and yawning wearily, "I never was so tired in my life."

"There is only one known remedy for that," commented Amy. "I am glad those beds are comfortable."

Half an hour later all was quiet at Forest Lodge. Even Phrosy had consented to put out her light and go to sleep.

Nothing to break that serene stillness save the mysterious night sounds of the forest. Hours passed with still nothing to break that silence. Then——

Jessie sat up in bed, her eyes straining wide to pierce the darkness, her heart hammering. What was it that had waked her? Some sound? Her hand flew to her throat to press back the startled cry.

From out of the depths of the woodland it came again—a long, low, agonized moan, like the cry of a soul in torment.

CHAPTER XI

PHROSY

TREMBLING, Jessie sprang out of bed, slipped a negligee about her shoulders, and ran noiselessly to the window.

She stood there shivering. It came again—that sound—more eerie, more terrifying than before.

The echo had barely died away when there was a terrific shriek within the house, and Phrosy, scantily clothed and wild-eyed, rushed from her room.

"Dat's de ghost! Dat's de ghost!" she chattered, terrified. "I done tell you he was 'roun' dis place! Ah'm gwine leave here in de mo'nin'!"

"Hush, Phrosy, please," ordered Miss Alling. She, as well as Amy and Nell, had been awakened by the hubub, but she alone had had the presence of mind to light a lamp.

Now, with this illumination to sustain them, they gathered in Jessie's room, Miss Alling doing her utmost to reassure and pacify the terrified Phrosy.

"Ah'm gwine git mah things on dis minute an'

go straight away f'om here," protested the latter through chattering teeth. "Ain't nobody gwine hold me here no longer."

"Don't be absurd, Phrosy," said Aunt Emma, in a voice that showed her patience was deserting her. "You know very well you can't leave here now. There are no boats running till morning, and I am certainly not going to get out the car and try the mountain road after dark. Do you intend to walk?"

"No'm, reckon Ah don't," returned Phrosy, somewhat impressed by this argument but still in the grip of panic. "Reckon dere ain't no gittin' away till to-morrow, but I sho intentions to take dat mo'nin' boat. Ah wouldn't stay in dis place any mo'e nights, no'm, not fo' a million dollars, Ah wouldn't."

"Nobody is likely to offer you that much, anyway, Phrosy," retorted Miss Alling, adding, as she turned to Jessie: "Do you know what all this is about? I haven't heard anything."

"Neither have I," said Amy, standing beside the shivering Nell. "I am afraid Nell and I missed the show."

Jessie hesitated. It was evident that she was the only one besides the colored woman who had heard that agonized moan from the direction of the swamp. Subconsciously she had been expecting to hear it repeated, but no sound had

greeted her strained attention. If she should tell them that Phrosy was not the only one to be frightened by that strange and eerie cry, would they not perhaps laugh at her, as they were now laughing at Phrosy?

Her hesitation was short-lived, however, for, besides the advisability of telling the truth at all times, she felt that she owed it to the groaning Phrosy to admit that there was something queer going on down by the swamp.

"I heard a noise," she said.

The girls and Miss Alling stared at her in surprise, while even Phrosy stopped groaning long enough to bestow upon her a look of awe.

"Why, Jessie, you didn't really!" cried Amy, delightedly. "What kind of noise?"

"It was a horrid sound," said Jessie, slowly. "Like a wailing moan——"

Phrosy let forth another hair-raising shriek and began to rock herself to and fro, hands lifted beseechingly to heaven.

"Dat's de ghost what Ah heard! Dat's de ghost what Ah heard?" she chanted over and over, until Miss Alling was forced to silence her and her voice dropped to a wailing monotone.

The girls were wildly excited and even Miss Alling looked worried.

"I don't know what to say," she confessed at last, regarding Jessie seriously. "I had supposed

that Phrosy's imagination was running away with her, but if you heard it too, Jessie——"

"It came twice," said Jessie. "And it was after the second time that Phrosy yelled——"

"Oh! What's that?"

It was Nell who spoke, and the girls jumped nervously.

"Praise de Lord! Praise de Lord!"

"Phrosy, be quiet—do!" from Miss Alling. "What was it you heard, Nell?"

"It was like a whistle—soft and repeated three times."

"Oh, that was Darry's call," broke in Jessie, feeling wonderfully relieved.

"The boys have heard the commotion and have come to find out if we are still alive," suggested Amy, as they started toward the door, dragging the still-trembling Phrosy with them.

Though she was sure that no one but the boys were behind that door, Jessie waited until she heard them speak before opening it.

As their voices reached her reassuringly she flung the door wide, beckoning them eagerly to come in.

The boys looked about them eagerly and with undisguised relief as they realized that the girls and Miss Alling—and even black Phrosy—were alive and well.

"You girls shouldn't scare us like that," com-

plained Burd. "From the noise, we thought a lion had been let loose among you, at least."

"It was Phrosy who did the screaming," said Jessie. "She thought she heard a ghost."

"Ah done heard dat ghost an' Ah done see him wiv mah own eyes," asserted Phrosy stubbornly. "Ah done see dat ghost walkin' down near de swamp plain as Ah sees you all here in dis room."

The boys started to scoff at this, but when they heard that Jessie had heard the moaning cry down near the swamp, their incredulity changed to wonder and, finally, to alarm.

"May be some poor fellow down there in need of help," said Darry, and immediately proposed that the three boys should investigate the cry.

The girls were opposed to the idea, and did not want the boys to go. But the boys insisted and finally had their own way.

After two hours of fruitless search during which the girls sat together, talking in low tones, Darry and his companions returned, declaring that they had heard and seen nothing to excite the least suspicion.

"If you ask for my private opinion," said Miss Alling, "it is that we had all better go back to bed for the present and talk this thing over in the morning. Shoo yourselves back to the cabin,

boys, and if you hear any more noises, don't pay any attention to them."

After some good-natured grumbling the boys did as she suggested. But when, a few minutes later, the girls tried to coax Phrosy back to bed, they found her adamant in her intention to sit up for the rest of the night.

"Ah's goin' to keep dis lamp burnin' an' sit just where Ah is," she declared. "An' in de mo'nin' Ah'm gwine away f'om here an' nothin' an' nobody ain't nebber gwine git me back, no suh, not so long as Ah lives!"

So they left her there, perforce, and in the morning found her sitting in the same place, the lamp burned out and her black head bobbing upon her breast.

But everything looks more cheerful in the daylight and this seemed true even of Phrosy's ghosts. Between them, and using the argument that whoever or whatever was down by the swamp had not yet attempted to harm them, they finally persuaded Phrosy not to desert them just then. However, her decision to stay was provisional upon the behavior of the ghosts. The next time the "ha'nts" spoke, Phrosy left. That was certain.

The first day passed so swiftly in and about the lodge that night found the Radio Girls unprepared—and their radio set not yet erected.

So it happened that the following morning

Jessie got them all up early and set them all to unpacking the various parts of the set while she herself got ready for the hardest part of the work, the erecting of the aerial.

The boys came around, humbly begging to be allowed to work, but, except in the assembling of the parts, Jessie gently but firmly denied their petition.

"We want to show Miss Alling that we are as good sports as she is and really are of some use in the out-of-doors," she said, smiling at the chaperone, who was interestedly inspecting the various parts of the set. "She wouldn't believe that we erected the set at home practically by ourselves."

"I will believe it now when I see it done," said Miss Alling, crisply, but pleasantly.

"We are the greatest little demonstrators you ever saw," murmured Amy, handling the detector with fond care. "Watch us and learn."

"They are altogether too sure of themselves, these girls," said Fol, in an injured tone. "I guess there is no room for us around here, fellows."

"We'll come in handy when they start to string up the aerial," remarked Darry, in a stage whisper. "I reckon they haven't the least idea how they are going to do it."

"Trees!" said Jessie, laconically.

"Humph! Do you suppose you are going to be able to climb into a tree far enough to fasten your aerial wire?"

Jessie squinted calmly up into the giant oak whose foliage-weighted branches spread themselves above the lodge.

"As Amy so aptly remarked a few moments ago, watch and learn!" she said, and Darry walked off in high dudgeon.

Burd and Fol, feeling sure that the girls' resolution would weaken as they watched Darry's departure, lingered expectantly for a few moments. Then, as no requests for help were forthcoming, they followed Darry, declaring that they intended to linger no longer in a spot where their room was so evidently preferred to their company.

Left alone, the girls worked like beavers, setting up, assembling, and getting ready for the hardest part of all, the erection of the aerial.

At last all the work was done that could be done upon the ground, and the girls turned to the tree from which they intended to string their aerial. It was a convenient distance from the house, and the wires, reaching from the top of the tall tree to the lodge, should be able to record messages from a considerable distance.

Miss Alling, standing at the foot of the tree, watched the ascent with an ever-increasing interest. She was an extremely athletic person her-

self, and yet she doubted if she would have had the nerve to climb to the top of that tree, even in the service of radio. Now and then she cheered them on with shouted words of encouragement. By the time they were two-thirds of the way toward their goal she was fairly prancing with excitement.

The girls, intent on their work, heard her only vaguely and saw her not at all. As a matter of fact, they were not particularly anxious to look down. It was easier—and safer—to look up, for something told them they had gone a considerable distance from the ground.

Jessie, in the lead, her tool kit slung over one shoulder, climbed laboriously into a crotch of the tree, holding tightly to the coil of wire. With her free hand she beckoned to Amy, who, from various scrabbling sounds, she knew to be directly beneath her.

"Shouldn't wonder if this would do all right," she called. "Think we are high enough?"

"I think we are far too high," Amy's voice answered her. "Don't move, Jess. I am coming up!"

The next moment a leg was flung over the branch and Amy took her place on the precarious perch beside Jessie. The two chums looked at each other and laughed.

"Nell is making heavy weather of it," re-

marked Amy. She moved closer to Jessie, who was already busy with the wire. "I passed her on the way up, and she was wedged tight between two branches. She said there was one good thing about it, anyway. There was no possible danger of her falling. But I could tell by her face that she wasn't exactly enjoying herself. Now what first, Jess?"

"Help me fasten this thing," returned Jessie. "I have to hold on with one hand which leaves me only one to work with and I have need of at least six."

"I suppose my one wouldn't do you any good then," said Amy, giggling. "But such as it is it is at your service."

At that moment Nell called to them, and they looked around to find her peering at them from below.

"Any room on that perch?" she asked. "Looks kind of precarious to me."

"Climb up on the other side, can't you?" suggested Jessie. "You will do more good there. And, Nell dear, please hurry. We need an extra hand badly."

At last it was done. One end of the wire was fastened neatly and securely to the tree while the other dangled earthward, ready for attachment to the roof of the lodge.

They started downward cautiously, aware that

the descent was more difficult and perilous than the upward climb. Slipping, scrambling, clinging when the footing failed them, inch by inch, foot by foot, they made their way downward.

Suddenly something happened. Jessie cried out sharply. Her foot had slipped. Her hand, flung frantically out, grasped nothing. A sea of green leaves and waving branches flew up to meet her. She struck upon something heavily, clutched it, hung there gasping, eyes closed——

CHAPTER XII

QUEER ACTIONS

IT was Amy's voice, frantic, terrified, that roused Jessie to a more immediate sense of her great peril. Her foot had caught in a crotch of a branch as she fell, and by this she hung, head downward, hands clasped desperately about the branch that had stopped her descent. In that position she could neither let herself down nor draw herself up. And she was still a dangerous distance from the ground.

Amy had climbed up to her, had taken in the situation in one startled glance. Nell, who had been following Jessie, clung to a branch, staring down, weak and sick with fright.

"Hang on, Jess, honey," begged Amy. "We will get you out all right. Hold on for just another minute."

Jessie held on desperately while Amy tugged at her foot, and Nell, mastering her fright, descended slowly. Miss Alling was calling out advice and commands. A horrible dizziness was engulfing Jessie. She felt as though all the blood in her body was pounding in her ears. The sight

of the ground so far below set her senses reeling, made her fingers feel like putty.

"Are you holding hard?" she heard Amy's voice asking as though from a long distance. "I have your foot loose, Jess and Nell is waiting below to catch you and let you down easy. Can you hold on?"

Jessie must have said yes, though she never afterward remembered having done so, for the next moment she felt her foot released, felt herself swing downward, felt Nell catch her in one strong young arm and hold her tight against the tree the while Nell's voice urged frantically:

"There, put your foot on that branch—to the right—to the right!"

She felt it at last—something solid under her foot! She clung there, fighting the dizziness that swept over her again, thankful for Nell's supporting arm.

The vertigo lasted for only a moment, and with the help of the girls she managed somehow to make the rest of that descent and reach the ground. There Miss Alling caught her in her arms and half led, half carried her into the lodge.

Phrosy, all whites-of-eyes and sympathy, made her a cup of tea and fussed over her until Jessie declared she would begin to think herself an invalid before long, instead of a perfectly healthy outdoor girl who had met with a simple accident.

"If that was simple, I hope I never meet anything complex!" was Amy's comment.

In spite of the dreadful fright and shaking up they had had, the girls insisted upon finishing the work of installing the radio before the boys returned.

"For, after all our boasting, they must never know how near I came to grief," was Jessie's decision, and in this both Amy and Nell heartily agreed with her. It was easy to win Miss Alling and Phrosy over to their side, and it was solemnly vowed that absolute silence should be kept concerning the accident.

They worked feverishly after that, hoping to make up for lost time. The dangling aerial wires were attached to the roof of the lodge. Amy and Nell took charge of this, laying down the law that Jessie was to do no more climbing that day. Jessie herself adjusted the lead-in wire.

At last all was in readiness and the girls sat down to "listen in" with a pride and pleasure that more than paid them for their exertion.

Aunt Emma's interest was also flattering, although she had a few sharp things to say about the inconvenience of using head phones.

They were thoroughly enjoying themselves when the boys came back, declaring that they had had a most delightful hike through the woods. They were really surprised to find the set erected

and in working order in such a short time, and very heartily said so. In fact, everything was going splendidly when Darry made the announcement that he and the other boys intended to take a short run to Gibbbonsville.

"But, when?" asked Amy, staring at him.

"Why, right away. It won't take long," returned Darry, at which his sister quite pointedly turned her back on him.

"You may all go when you like and stay as long as you please," she informed him icily.

A few minutes later the girls stood watching Darry's car as it disappeared in a cloud of dust down the road.

"I reckon I know why Darry has gone to Gibbonsville," said Jessie, slowly. "He has gone to see that girl!"

"You mean that girl who passed the bad five-dollar bill on me?" demanded Amy.

"Yes."

"But why should he go to see her?"

"I don't know. It is certainly a mystery," answered Jessie, and turned away. Somehow, she felt that she did not care just then to say more. She went in and set to work to adjust the radio set so that they might listen in with greater ease and clearness. She had found that she could always "lose herself" when working over the radio.

"I think it is mean of the boys to desert us," said Amy, some time later, as she got into her snug-fitting black bathing suit and pulled a rubber cap over her heavy hair. "There! how do I look?" she added, turning slowly around so that Jessie and Nell might admire the effect.

"Stunning. You always do," answered Nell, as she laced up her bathing shoes. "But I am wondering how long that suit will last in the water."

The girls had felt the lure of the cool waters of the lake as they had not felt it since their arrival. They wanted, as Amy said, "to swim and swim and keep on swimming."

So now they ran down to the dock, debating whether to take out one of the canoes or to swim around near the dock.

"Might as well swim close to home," said Nell, as she stood close to the edge of the dock, hands over her head in a diving posture, and regarded her reflection in the water. "Then we'll be on hand to keep a lookout for the boys."

She leaned a bit too far out over the water and lost her balance. Jessie and Amy saw her fall forward suddenly and heard her give a little cry that was more of astonishment than fear. Then the water closed over her.

The two girls ran forward, laughing, for the water at this point was only four or five feet, and

it was impossible for a swimmer like Nell to drown in that depth.

What they had not seen was this—that, as she went down, Nell struck her head upon the edge of the dock. They saw only that she had not come up.

"She must be swimming under water," said Jessie, not yet seriously alarmed. "Run around to the other side of the dock, Amy."

Amy obeyed, and still no sign of Nell. As she came running back she saw that Jessie was already poised for a dive. There was a splash. Jessie disappeared, then rose to the surface, shaking the water from her eyes.

"She—must be—under the dock!" she gasped, and disappeared again.

"Under the dock!" thought Amy, a swift fear at her heart. She had heard of people swimming around and around under a dock, unable to find their way out, drowning because they could not come up for air. But this was such a little dock! Almost with the thought she also struck the water.

She came up for air and saw Jessie dragging something inert. She caught one glimpse of a white face and turned sick with dread.

Together they got Nell on the dock.

"She is dead!" sobbed Amy, as they worked over her feverishly. "No live person ever looked like that!"

"See that bruise on her forehead?" whispered Jessie. "Amy, I think, I believe, she was unconscious when she struck the water."

The bruise was up close to her hair, swollen and turning black. It stood out startlingly in the pallor of her face.

Panic-stricken, Jessie was about to rush to the lodge for help and some stimulant from the medicine chest when Amy called to her.

"She moved! Oh, Jess, come here quick! There is color in her face."

Jessie returned and sank quickly to her knees, taking Nell's cold, inert hand in both her warm ones.

"Nell, Nell, open your eyes!" she begged. "Tell us you are all right!"

As if that urgent call could not be denied, Nell opened weary eyes and looked vaguely about her.

"What is the matter?" she asked faintly, sitting up and putting a hand to her head. "I fell—I can't remember——"

"Don't try, dear. It is all right now," said Jessie, soothingly, while the happy tears ran down her face.

"Just rest and don't worry," said Amy, surreptitiously wiping the tears from her own eyes. "You did give us a terrible scare, Nell."

A sharp rumble of thunder broke the stillness of the forest, and the girls realized with a shock

of surprise that the sun had gone under a cloud and the sky was overcast.

Nell struggled slowly to get to her feet, the girls helping her. She was shivering, either with weakness or the sudden chill that had crept into the air. The wind had risen and was sighing ominously through the trees.

They supported Nell back toward the lodge, but before they reached the shelter of it the sudden storm increased in fury. The wind rose to a tempest, the lightning flashed vividly, streaking in jagged rents across the sky. There came a crash of thunder that made them shiver with the impact of the noise upon their ears.

"Our radio!" cried Jessie, suddenly remembering. "We have no lightning arrester. Oh, girls, let's hurry!"

They needed no urging. Even Nell, alive to the danger from the lightning, momentarily forgot her narrow escape from death.

They dashed into the lodge, pursued by the menacing roar of the elements. They slammed the door shut behind them and turned to confront Aunt Emma and the shuddering Phrosy.

"Fo' de lan's sakes, Ah is glad to see you young ladies back agin. Ah sho did t'ink dose storm debbils done carry yo' off fo' fair!" After delivering herself of this comment, poor Phrosy was

sent off into the kitchen by the relentless Miss Alling, there to suffer in silence.

Jessie and Amy rushed to the radio set, while Nell sank into a chair, covering her eyes with her hand.

"What are you going to do?" asked Amy, as Jessie produced a pair of scissors.

"Cut the in-wire!" she said, and, a moment later, had suited the action to the word. The danger from lightning was past, for that time, at least.

"What is that?" cried Nell, starting nervously from her chair.

There came a terrific flash of lightning, a reverberating thunder clap, a crackling as though the forest were on fire, a thud and a slithering sound as of a heavy body striking the roof.

"De end of de world am come, it am fo' sure!" shrieked Phrosy, dashing in upon them, her eyes rolling wildly. "Ah'm gwine away f'om here! Ain't nobody gwine stop me! Ah's gwine!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE RACE

NO ONE tried to stop Phrosy in her threatened flight. In fact, the impulse of them all was toward flight, and they followed that impulse.

"Something fell on the roof!" cried Amy, starting to open the door and shrinking back against it as another clap of thunder reverberated through the forest.

"Open the door!" cried Jessie, impatiently, as she pushed Amy aside.

"Yes, we had better get outside," put in Miss Alling, trying to keep calm. "For all we know, the roof may come down on top of us."

The door flew open with a bang and a tremendous gust of wind fairly blew them against the opposite wall.

"What a gale!" gasped Nell. "We'll never be able to get out there!"

"I am going!" declared Jessie, and with lowered head dashed into the open. The other girls, gathering courage from her example, followed,

and brought up short at the sight that met their eyes.

A giant tree, half dead at the top, had been struck by the lightning and uprooted. In its fall the outermost branches had brushed the roof of the lodge.

"Lucky it did not fall across the roof," said Amy, shivering. "That would have meant good-bye lodge for fair."

"Struck pretty close to us, at that," said Nell. "Lucky you cut that in-wire, Jess."

"Better get inside again," said Miss Alling. "We shall be soaked in a moment."

For the rain had begun in earnest, coming down in a swishing torrent that drove them on a run for the shelter of the lodge. And there they stayed until the storm blew itself out.

So quickly did the time pass after the departure of the boys for Gibbonsville that it was the second day before the girls began to feel anxious about them.

They were just beginning to imagine all kinds of dreadful things that might have happened to them when Burd and Fol returned, in Darry's roadster, but not with Darry.

Upon relentless questioning Burd admitted that Darry had lingered in Gibbonsville.

"You see, it was this way," Burd tried to explain, as the girls showered him with questions.

"We were not able to find out anything satisfactory about this girl of mystery who saddled you with an unpassable five-dollar bill, Amy, and so, when we got discouraged and said we were coming back before we had missed all the fun, Darry said we would have to go back without him."

"But you shouldn't have let him do anything so perfectly ridiculous!" said Amy, vexed. "There were two of you to one. Couldn't you have made him come back with you?"

Burd chuckled.

"If you have ever tried to make your brother do anything he didn't want to do, you know how easy it is," he remarked. "I would just about as soon try to teach a wild elephant to dance. Nothing doing! When Darry acts like that the one thing to do is to give him his head."

"But he must have been terribly interested in—that girl—to do a thing like this," said Jessie, slowly, and Burd looked at her queerly. He seemed about to speak, but changed his mind.

"If you ask me," said Fol, "I think he was just plain off his head."

"And you didn't catch sight of that awful girl?" asked Amy.

"We didn't," replied Burd, with just the faintest possible emphasis on the we.

"Then my five dollars is gone forever unless Darry succeeds in getting it back for me!"

"I haven't the least idea it is the five-dollar bill Darry is worrying about," said Burd, significantly, and thereafter not all Amy's bribes or threats could bring from him an explanation of the cryptic sentence.

It was some hours later that Burd took Jessie by the arm and drew her aside from the others.

"See here, Jess," he said. "I don't like the way Darry is acting, at all."

"What do you mean?" queried Jessie, all her fears of the morning once more active.

"He hasn't been like himself——"

"I have noticed that," broke in the girl, impatiently. "You have something special you want to tell me about Darry, Burd. Please don't keep me waiting."

Burd hesitated.

"I am telling you this," he said, at last, "because you are level-headed and not apt to go off the handle like Amy. Jessie, I have reason to believe that Darry saw that girl when we were in Gibbonsville."

"What makes you think that?" asked Jessie, faintly. Suddenly the world seemed all upside down.

"He managed to dodge away from Fol and me when we weren't looking," Burd answered, stirring up some loose stones with his foot and looking extremely uncomfortable. "And later on

when we were looking for him we came suddenly around a corner and saw him talking with some one. His companion dodged out of sight when she saw us, but Fol and I saw that it was a girl, and, from the description you gave of her, it seemed pretty sure that she was the same one you and Amy are after."

"What did Darry say when he knew you had seen him? Did he—explain?" asked Jessie, slowly.

"There is the most peculiar part of it," Burd answered reluctantly. "He not only refused to explain but acted as though angry and was unpleasant about the whole thing. Accused us of trying to spy on him and of several other crimes that were farthest from our minds. He even went so far as to say that we had 'spoiled it all.' "

"What did he mean by that?" asked Jessie, puzzled and speaking more to herself than to Burd.

"That is what I would give a good deal to find out," returned Burd, ruefully, then adding, with a chuckle: "You should have heard him when, in an evil moment, Fol asked him for an explanation. Near chewed Fol's head off."

Jessie shook her head slowly. The situation was even more mysterious than she had thought it, and with each of Burd's startling revelations she became more hopelessly bewildered.

"Did he say when he was coming back?" she asked, after a long reflective pause. Again Burd shook his head.

"He wouldn't tell us anything," he said, adding with a frown: "I don't mind admitting to you he got me pretty sore."

Jessie smiled slightly and murmured that she "didn't wonder."

"I don't know what we can do about it," she added, after a moment, as they turned and started back toward the others. "I am sure Darry has good reasons for acting as he does, and when he comes to explain everything to us we shall see that he could not have acted differently."

But in spite of her brave words she was troubled, and, partly to get Darry and his strange behavior out of her mind and partly to give herself something absorbing to do, she suggested that they "listen in" on a concert.

All the rest of that afternoon and evening the girls and boys and Miss Alling spent at the radio. Toward evening they had the luck to tune in on the airway of the forest ranger station.

Some one at the station was giving a talk on the prevention of forest fires by radio, and they listened with interest.

"I suppose they wouldn't stage a little forest fire for us," said Amy at the end of the talk, removing the phones and rubbing her head where

they had pressed. "It would be great fun to see one."

"It would be more fun not to!" said Burd, decidedly. "That station isn't far from here. What do you girls say to taking a run over there, soon?"

"We say 'yes,' " was the enthusiastic response from all.

"The sooner the better," added Jessie.

Darry came back the next day, but he positively refused to give any reason for his prolonged stay in Gibbonsville. After two or three attempts even his sister gave up questioning him, and Amy was persistent.

"Might just as well try to get information from a wooden idol," Amy said disgustedly to Jessie. "I think that girl must have thrown a spell over him."

"Then I should certainly like to remove it," returned Jessie, moodily. "He isn't one bit like the old Darry."

"Who isn't?"

They turned, startled, to see Darry himself looking down at them and laughing. He had climbed into the branches of a huge old gnarled oak that threw its shade before the lodge and now sat dangling his legs in solid comfort. He had even taken a book up with him for company.

"Well, of all things! Reading on a day like

this!" cried Amy. "Can't you think of anything better to do with your time, Darry Drew?"

"If you could suggest something sufficiently enticing," said Darry, with a grin, "I might be lured down from this leafy bower. You don't know how comfortable it is up here, really," he said, with a sigh, as he realized that his peaceful solitude must come to an end.

"Hear the man!" laughed Nell, who had come up just in time to hear his last words. "His eagerness to be with us is flattering!"

"Far be it from me to be ungallant to the ladies," said Darry, dropping to the ground and bowing low before them. "I am at your service, fair ones. Command me!"

"Hey, don't be too reckless, Darry," warned Burd, as he and Fol joined the group. "They may ask you to repair their radio or start a forest fire or something. I know them!"

"As if we couldn't take care of our radio by ourselves," said Jessie, scornfully.

"A little forest fire might furnish some excitement," added Amy brightly. "We would need only a very little one, you know."

"And what fun to see the forest rangers at work!" exclaimed Nell.

"Now, what did I tell you?" demanded Burd.

"I have an idea worth two of that," cried Jessie gayly. "I have been wanting to suggest

it ever since we came up here. How about a canoe race?"

"Pretty fine," applauded Fol. "We will take three canoes, a girl and a fellow in each boat——"

"Oh, no! That wouldn't be any fun," Jessie protested. "My idea was for Nell and Amy and me to race you three boys."

The boys stared at them for a moment and then burst into loud guffaws of amusement.

"We certainly like your nerve," remarked Burd, indulgently, not annoyed in the least by the indignant glances from three pairs of feminine eyes. "How much handicap would you like? A mile? Or would a half mile do?"

"You think you are smart, don't you?" retorted Amy. "We will race you fair and square from the start, and——"

"Beat you, too," finished Jessie, decidedly.

"All right," chuckled Darry, heading down toward the dock. "Honors are even, and the best man—best girl—wins!"

With much merriment they selected the canoes that were to be used in the contest. The girls chose the green craft as being the one they were most used to and, "just to make the color scheme good," Burd said, the boys chose the crimson.

After some good-natured squabbling it was decided that Jessie and Nell do the paddling while Amy should furnish the "ballast." The latter

yielded to this arrangement only after it had been pointed out to her that Nell was stronger than she and that Jessie was the most skilful of the three in the handling and steering of the boat.

"I may be an important part of this race," was Amy's final protest. "But I can't see it myself."

The boys had long since decided that Darry and Burd would do the paddling, Fol not having had as much experience in the art as had the two older boys.

"We will race from this dock to the big pier," suggested Darry, when all other questions were settled.

They agreed, and at the snappy command "Go!" from Darry, started off right gallantly for the pier. The pier was the only one of its kind along Lake Towako and received the incoming excursion steamers from points farther down the lake. There was a stream connecting this body with Lake Monenset upon which New Melford was situated. In this way it would have been possible to travel all the way from New Melford to Forest Lodge by water—though the girls and boys unanimously agreed that the motor trip had been much more thrilling.

Now, as the paddles bit deep into the glassy surface of the water, Jessie and Nell put all their strength into the stroke. The canoe shot forward

swiftly, but, alas, the boys shot ahead more swiftly still!

Before they had gone a hundred yards the boys were hopelessly in the lead, and Burd raised a victorious paddle to wave at them tauntingly.

That gesture proved to be his undoing. The handle of the paddle, slippery with water, slid from his careless grasp and drifted lazily beyond his reach.

"He has lost his paddle! He has lost his paddle!" chanted Amy, bouncing up and down in the canoe and threatening to upset them at every bounce. "Go it, girls; go it! We've got 'em at our mercy!"

"I am not so sure of that," giggled Jessie, but she leaned still harder on the paddle and Nell responded nobly to the call for "full steam ahead."

Laughing so they could hardly paddle, the girls passed the boys, who were still fishing for the paddle.

As the girls went by, Burd made one more grab for it, nearly upsetting the canoe as he did so. He caught the paddle, but the effort had half turned the canoe about, and by the time it was started in the right direction again the girls had almost reached the pier.

The result was a winning of the race with a whole boat-length to spare.

"Look!" cried Jessie, as the boys, looking a little sheepish, came up to them. "Isn't that a steamer coming in?"

"To be sure it is," said Nell, with interest. "Suppose we wait and see who is on it."

"Ah, that is just a stall to get out of giving us our revenge," declared Burd, grinning. "Dare you to race us back to the dock."

"Perhaps Burd could hang onto his paddle this time, if he tried hard," said Darry, sarcastically.

But Jessie, with a laugh, shook her head.

"That wasn't the bargain," she reminded them. "The course of the race was from dock to pier, and we won it."

"You shouldn't have dropped that paddle, Burd," said Fol, with a worried expression. "Really you shouldn't! We shall never hear the end of this."

"Oh, hush, and let's watch this boat," said Nell, with an eager eye on the approaching steamer. "Looks like a big one, and—just see—her decks are crowded with people."

"Better keep on this side of the pier and draw in a little toward shore," Darry suggested. "Otherwise the swells from that craft might affect us unpleasantly."

They followed his suggestion and drew in toward shore. The steamer came rapidly closer,

slowed as it neared its destination and slipped up to the pier.

With interest, the girls watched as the steamer disgorged its crowds upon the dock.

Most of these people—girls and women in gay-colored sports clothes and men and boys in natty white flannels—landed just long enough to eat lunch and get a glimpse of the picturesque forest. Then back again by the steamer to New Melford.

Suddenly, with a hysterical giggle and a clutch on Jessie's arm, Amy pointed to some one in the crowd.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" she cried. "Or is that Belle Ringold?"

"What!" cried Darry, starting up, a hunted look on his face. "Tell me you are mistaken, Amy—quick!"

"Would that I could, but I cannot," returned Amy mournfully.

Jessie and Nell now discovered with dismay that Belle was accompanied by her boon companion, Sally Moon.

"Merciful heaven, let's get out of this!" cried Burd. "Let's go home!"

"For once, Burd, you have said something with some sense to it," Darry declared, as with strong quick strokes he headed the canoe about and started back toward Forest Lodge, the girls in their wake.

They made the trip back to the dock in record time. The boys beat the girls, but they refrained from taunting them with the fact. They were too much occupied congratulating themselves over the fortunate escape from Belle and Sally.

But to their chagrin, a few hours later that afternoon they found these same two girls camped before the door of the lodge, quite evidently on the watch for them. Aunt Emma had been talking to Belle and Sally, and the Radio Girls chuckled at the look on their chaperone's face.

The young folks had been for a tramp in the woods and had come back, talkative and happy—to this. Belle and Sally were seated in a pony cart, and Belle held the reins negligently over an exceedingly wide-awake and alert looking pony.

"Oh, so here you are!" called out the girl, as Jessie and Darry, leading the party, came in sight. "You were gone so long we began to think you were never coming back!"

Belle spoke gayly and with seeming cordiality. However, the girls were not deceived by this attitude. It was assumed, they knew, so that Sally and Belle might ingratiate themselves with the boys. It seemed probable that their sole motive in visiting Forest Lodge was the prospect of speaking to Darry and Burd again.

"Would that we had stayed a little longer,"

said Darry, in a mournful undertone to Jessie, and the latter shot him a mischievous glance.

Belle caught her look, and it did little to increase her good temper.

"Well, aren't you even going to say hello?" she asked pettishly. "I must say you are not very polite!"

"Sorry, Belle, I am sure," said Jessie coolly. "Of course we did not know you were here or we would not have stayed away so long. Won't you come in for a little while?"

Belle ignored this question and turned eagerly to Darry.

"We are staying with a friend of ours for a day or two," she said. "She is a sort of cousin of mine and she owns a beautiful cottage about a mile from here. If we like it here," she added, smiling coyly at the harassed Darry, "we might stay longer."

"Is that a threat or a promise?" murmured the impish Amy, and unfortunately Belle heard her.

The girl's face flamed red and she turned upon Amy furiously.

"If you want to know, I wasn't speaking to you," she flared.

"And if you want to know, I wasn't speaking to you, either," returned Amy coolly. Jessie put an urgent hand upon her chum's arm.

"Don't answer her," she whispered. "Can't you see she is just spoiling for a fight?"

Sally had buttonholed the uncomfortable Burd and Belle was speaking to Darry in a coaxing tone.

"We are having a party to-night, and we would like you boys to come. You can come, too, if you want to," she flung carelessly to the three girls.

Amy started to speak, but Jessie held her back. She saw Darry smile and thought him quite capable of coping with the situation.

"We are very sorry," he said courteously. "But we have an engagement with the girls to listen in to a big radio concert this evening."

"You can come too, if you like," drawled Amy, in such perfect imitation of Belle's own condescending tones that the others were convulsed.

In sudden fury Belle brought the whip in her hand down upon the pony's back. The little animal snorted, jumped, and began to run.

"Look out," cried Jessie, wildly. "He is headed straight for the dock!"

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE MUD

BELLE saw the danger and began frantically sawing at the reins. It was too late. The outraged animal had taken the bit in his teeth and started to run. He was going to keep on running.

Sally began to scream, and Belle, beside herself with fear and not knowing what she did, began to use the whip. That was the last straw. No animal could be expected to stand such treatment.

Paralysed as they had been for a moment by the sudden turn of affairs, the boys were galvanized to action by the screams of Sally and Belle. They rushed headlong after the pony, the Radio Girls and Nell also in pursuit.

Out upon the dock the pony raced, shying a little as he saw the water.

Sally and Belle took advantage of the momentarily slackened speed, and, shrieking wildly, jumped from the pony cart into the water.

The pony reared, turned to one side, and at that moment Darry reached his head and caught the reins, close to the bit. He pulled the pony's

head down with all his strength, speaking at the same time reassuringly.

"Whoa, old boy. Steady now, steady. Nothing's going to hurt you. That's the ticket. Nice little fellow, nice old boy."

The pony stood still, bobbing his head and nervously pawing at the dock. It was an easy matter then for Darry to turn him about and head him back to shore.

Meanwhile the others had rushed to the rescue of the bedraggled and raging girls. They had fallen into the muddy part of the lake, and had literally to be dragged out upon the dock. Their natty suits were covered with mud and slime, their hair had come loose from the pins, and their faces were bespattered with mud. An unpleasant spectacle, and the worst of it was that Belle and Sally knew it full well.

Without a word of thanks and with glances that were blacker than the mud that covered them, they climbed once more into the pony cart and drove away.

The boys and girls waited until they were out of sight before giving way to their hysterical mirth.

"Poor Belle! Poor Sally!" gasped Amy, as they turned back toward the lodge where Miss Alling was waiting for them. "I never saw anything so screamingly funny in my life."

"Served Belle Ringold right!" said Jessie, indignantly. "Imagine whipping that darling pony!"

"Well, he got even with a vengeance," chuckled Amy. "Belle and Sally won't forget that ducking in a hurry."

It was arranged that early on the next day they would pack a lunch and tramp through the woods to the station of the forest rangers. Miss Alling, who said she had come up to the lodge for a much needed rest, would not join them on this jaunt, declaring that forest rangers were no novelty to her and that she would enjoy a quiet day in her hammock more than a long hike through the woods.

The next day was an ideal one for their trip and, as Phrosy had packed them a hamper of good things, they expected to enjoy themselves thoroughly.

A little before noon they reached the station of the forest rangers and regarded curiously the long, low buildings and towering antennæ of the wireless.

"I would like to see their sending set," said Jessie, eagerly. "It must be a wonder."

"Well, come along," Darry answered. "We'll probably find somebody to show us the place."

It was their good fortune that the first man they met was John Halsey, head of the forest

rangers and a very amiable and pleasant gentleman.

When the young folks explained the reason for their visit and he saw that the girls were real radio fans, he made them welcome and volunteered to conduct them personally about the station.

"We have a large dynamo here," he said, as he led them into the broadcasting room, where the girls examined with eager interest the huge sending apparatus. "By means of this department of radio we keep in constant touch with various points throughout the forest."

"Then you must have receiving sets in the woods," said Jessie.

"So we have," replied Mr. Halsey, smiling. "The receiving end is, naturally, of as much importance as the sending. The broadcasting apparatus is the mouth, the receiving apparatus the ears, of the service."

"It is wonderful!" murmured Jessie.

"Do you suppose we could catch any of those messages on our set?" put in Amy, curiously.

"All you have to do is to tune in properly," answered Mr. Halsey, with a pleasant laugh. "Our messages are your personal property. I'll give you the wave length," and he did so.

"How thrilling! Then if there were a fire in the forest we would know all about it!" cried Nell.

"Indeed you would. And there are occasions when it is quite necessary to locate a forest fire," returned Mr. Halsey, seriously. "These fires sometimes travel with, seemingly, the swiftness of lightning, and it takes good work to outdistance them."

"Have there been many fires lately?" asked Jessie, with interest, and was conscious of a distinct disappointment when he laughingly shook his head.

"Not many, luckily. And I can only hope that we continue immune. I can remember the time," he continued, seriously, "when a great fire, sweeping northward, encroached so perilously upon this station that we were forced to dismantle our apparatus and take to the water. That was in the old days when radio was in its infancy and we had not yet learned to make airplanes the eyes of the service."

"I have heard about that—about the use of airplanes in the service of the forest rangers, I mean," said Darry, "and I have heard the pilots do a noble work."

"They do," said Mr. Halsey emphatically.

"Must be a lot of excitement," observed Fol.

"Excitement—and danger," amended Mr. Halsey. "Our airmen have to fly so low in order to observe the progress of the fire that often they are in the midst of a rain of burning embers.

Plenty of chance for heroism in the flying service of the rangers."

"The airplanes must be equipped with radio or they couldn't keep in touch with the station," suggested Jessie, and Mr. Halsey smiled at her interest.

"Each plane is equipped with radio, Miss Norwood, and a very sensitive apparatus, at that," he said. "They keep in constant touch with the fire-fighters and direct operations all through. They are, as I have said before, the eyes of the service."

The young people spent another delightful half hour, studying the receiving apparatus, wandering through the interesting quarters of the men, and listening to Mr. Halsey's talk. Then, knowing that they had a long tramp before them they said good-bye to Mr. Halsey, thanking him for his kindness to them and promising to visit the station again before they returned to New Melford.

Only a short distance from the station of the forest rangers they came upon an ideal spot to eat the lunch Phrosy had put up for them, and settled themselves comfortably for the feast.

When they had done full justice to the good things, they started on again at a slightly quickened pace. It was later than they had thought,

and they were conscious of a queer eagerness to be at the lodge again.

They did not at first attribute this eagerness to the fact that the path they were on did not seem as familiar to them as it should, considering that they had so recently trod it on their way to the station.

It was only when the path became more and more indistinct, the foliage thicker and almost impenetrable that they recognized the truth. They were lost.

CHAPTER XV

LOST IN THE WOODS

"WE certainly are the prize simpletons," said Amy, in disgust, as she sank down upon a great rock and looked about her. "Imagine getting lost in the woods—and at our age, too!"

"I think we must have been going about in circles for the last hour," said Nell, wearily. "This looks exactly like the spot we started from."

"It is, my dear girl," remarked Darry, disgustedly. "We are getting nowhere with astoning rapidity. I am just about ready to call it a day."

"You will soon call it a night," remarked Burd, all his usual cheerfulness submerged in a deep gloom.

"Oh, stop glooming," cried Jessie, and there was something in her voice that made them all look at her hopefully. She was fumbling in her pocket for something, and their curiosity grew.

"What you got there—a magic charm?" asked Darry.

"Better than that. It's a compass."

"A compass!" they cried, and the concerted sigh of relief was audible.

"Why didn't you tell us you had one?" reproached Amy. "I have three gray hairs in my head from worry."

"Forgot I had it," replied Jessie, as she and Darry studied the compass face. "I put it in my pocket the last minute thinking we might need it."

"And, by cracky, you were right!" exclaimed Fol.

After a good deal of figuring and discussion as to the probable direction of the rangers' station and Forest Lodge, they concluded that if they followed the needle of the compass north they must eventually reach the main trail.

Jessie kept the compass, and the others meekly followed her, thankful for that instinct of caution that had suggested the compass to her.

It took them some time to recover the ground they had lost, but their figuring proved to be correct and they came at last to the familiar rocky trail that led to Forest Lodge.

"Look at that house over there," said Jessie, suddenly, pointing to a gray and dilapidated little shack, standing back among the trees. "I remember noticing it on our way out and thinking it was an unpleasant looking place."

"Looks like a fine joint for a murder," observed Burd, and Amy uttered a shriek of protest.

"That is a nice thing to say, especially when we are still a long way from home," she protested, adding with a shudder, as she glanced at the gloomy-looking house: "I declare, I am almost afraid to go past the place."

"Come, I will protect you," announced Burd, grinning, and linked an arm through Amy's. But Amy was not in a mood to be protected. She jerked her arm away from Burd and glared indignantly.

"I will go past that place without any help or I won't go at all," she declared, and Burd's grin grew broader.

"All right, but as you pass, all of you glance in the side window," he said, and they looked at him in amazement.

Of course no one meant to obey this command and of course every one did. It was Amy who first discovered what Burd meant.

"Sheets!" she said, in a bewildered tone. "Lots of sheets hung all over that room!" And they all drew closer to the hut.

"Just like the morgue," said Burd. But when Amy turned on him, he amended quickly: "Maybe it's a laundry for folks about the lake."

"Hey, what are you doing around here?" demanded a rough voice, and they turned, startled to see a man approaching them from the rear of the house. He was a surly-looking fellow with

a week's growth of beard on his face. "What are you doing here?" he demanded again. "Don't you know this is private ground?"

"We confess to ignorance on that point, stranger," said Darry, with a glint of amusement in his eyes. "We were not aware that we were trespassing."

"Well, you are!" growled the man, and his manner became more threatening. "And what's more, we don't want no strangers round here. You get out and stay out. Understand?"

Darry's hands were clenched in anger and the other two boys were beginning to show fight, but the girls urged them onward.

"We don't want any trouble," said Jessie, urgently, as Darry seemed inclined to linger and settle with the ruffian then and there. "We don't know what kind of people they are."

"I can guess pretty well what kind they are!"

"But it is getting so late, Darry. Please."

Reluctantly Darry yielded to her, and they went on, leaving the man glowering after them unpleasantly.

"Surly ruffian. I would like to get my hands on him."

"Same here," growled Burd. "Any one would think we were planning to rob his house."

"Looks more as though he were planning to

rob ours," said Amy. "If ever I saw a villain, that fellow was it."

"I wonder why he was so anxious to get us away?" mused Jessie. "There must have been something about that house he was afraid to have us see."

It was now fast getting dark, and the young folks were almost running along the narrow rocky trail. Somehow, after their meeting with that surly fellow outside the shabby, mysterious hut, they wished less than ever to be overtaken by the dark when they were still far from Forest Lodge.

More than once Jessie paused, ear tuned to listen, more than half fearing pursuit, and, hearing nothing but the noises of the forest, allowed Darry to hurry her on again.

"We are almost there," he assured her at the last of these uneasy pauses. "I recognize that great oak we just passed, and back there a little way I thought I saw the dock."

"Oh, Darry, I will be so glad when we get home!" panted Jessie, and, taking her hand to hurry her on, Darry saw that she was trembling.

"Why, I do believe you are frightened," he said, in quick concern. "What are you afraid of, Jess?"

"I don't know," she gasped, between quick-drawn breaths. "I sort of have a feeling that something terrible is going to happen. I can't

tell you what makes me feel that way. It is just silly, I suppose——"

"You are tired," Darry interrupted, kindly. "Let's not hurry so fast. We don't have to, you know. We could find our way blindfolded from here on."

"I would hate to try," said Jessie, trying to laugh. "Probably we would end up by walking into the lake. Oh, Darry, where are the others?"

"Right ahead of us. Why, Jess, what is the matter?"

"Darry! Listen! Oh, what is that?"

From the direction of the marsh came a sound, eerie, moaning, rising to a terrible wail and dying off gradually into a throbbing silence. It came again and again.

Jessie caught Darry's hand and ran wildly, blindly, toward the lodge.

CHAPTER XVI

FROM THE SWAMP

THE girls and boys burst into the lodge to find Phrosy on her knees, hands raised heavenward in supplication.

"Dos ghosts is after me! Ah done knows it! Dis time dey gwine kill me fo' sure!"

"Nonsense, Phrosy," scolded Miss Alling, but even her voice was not so assured as usual. "That was only a fog horn."

"An' what am a fog horn doin' out in dat swamp, Miss Emma?" quavered the colored woman. "Ain't no boats out dere as Ah knows on."

"What do you suppose it was?" gasped Amy, her face white in the lamp light. "I never heard anything so dreadful!"

"It was de ghosts, Miss Amy," shrieked Phrosy, as she got lumberingly to her feet, threw her apron over her head, and dashed into her room, leaving them staring vacantly after her.

"Shut the door, somebody, do!" cried Jessie, in a voice just above a whisper. "It will keep out that sound. Listen—there it is again!"

"My advice is not to listen," said Darry, in a strange, gruff voice. "I think it would do us all good to eat something."

His last words were drowned by another shriek from Phrosy, and they all rushed into her room to find her standing before a window, her eyes rolling with fright. She was shaking as though she had the palsy.

They ran to the window and followed the direction of her pointing finger. The sight they witnessed then was enough to test the stoutest nerves.

Down by the swamp moving stealthily among the trees were shrouded, shadowy figures, white and vague of outline. While they watched, the figures disappeared slowly, seeming to dissolve into the shadows beyond their range of vision.

Phrosy was sobbing hysterically, and even the level-headed young folks were severely shaken.

"Let's get out of here—you, too, Phrosy," said Jessie suddenly. "It won't do any good to stand there looking out toward the swamp and watching for things. We will stay on the other side of the house for the next hour or so."

"What do you suppose the answer is, Darry?" Burd asked some time later, when they had so far pacified and cajoled Phrosy as to induce her to start preparations for a meal.

Jessie had suggested a fire in the grate with the idea of making the room more cheerful, and,

though the weather was not cool enough to warrant it, the others had cordially assented to the suggestion.

Now the young folks were gathered about the fire in a cozy semicircle while Aunt Emma was engaged in "managing" Phrosy in the kitchen.

"I haven't the slightest idea what it means," said Darry, in response to Burd's question. "Only I am sure it must be some kind of a fake," he added. "Just give us a little time, and we will show it up."

"That is just my idea," said Fol, eagerly. "What do you say to starting out to investigate that swamp in earnest early to-morrow morning?"

"A clever idea, Fol," applauded Burd. "Just what I was about to suggest myself."

"Why the look of deep thought, Darry, dear?" asked Amy, who had been regarding her brother with interest. "Aren't you enthusiastic about meeting our friends, the ghosts, face to face?"

Darry turned to her, an absent look in his eyes.

"Why, I can't to-morrow," he said hesitantly. "I have——"

"A date!" finished Burd, adding dryly: "I reckon I could tell where it is and with whom, too. And all that without the slightest pretensions to clairvoyance, either."

Darry shot him an annoyed glance and his eyes once more sought the fire. His silence was ominous.

Jessie, looking at him, became suddenly conscious that she was rather angry at Darry.

"If you are going to Gibbonsville, I don't see why you won't tell us about it," she said, and Darry stirred uncomfortably.

"I just want to run down there for an hour or two," he finally said, with a forced lightness that was evident to them all. "I suppose we can hunt ghosts in the afternoon just as well as in the morning, can't we?"

"I don't suppose it is really necessary to hunt them at all," said Amy, coolly, adding with the privileged frankness of a sister: "Really, Darry, this mystery business is getting on our nerves. I think I may say without any fear of contradiction, that you are annoying your friends, immensely."

"Sorry," said Darry, not at all in the tone that carries conviction; and there the matter dropped for the time being.

Dinner was served and the young folks gathered eagerly about the table.

That night Phrosy again spent the hours between midnight and dawn sitting upright in the living room with an oil lamp for company. And in the morning the girls found that her bag was

packed and that she could not this time be coaxed from her firm determination to leave the lodge before darkness came again.

In every way things seemed topsy-turvy, and they were torn between annoyance at Phrosy's decision and bewilderment at Darry's insistence that he possessed an unbreakable engagement in town.

He went away abruptly right after breakfast, seeming in a great hurry to avoid any inconvenient questioning by them. They watched him go, and in uncomfortable silence turned back to the house.

"There is Phrosy, hat on and bag in hand," said Nell, pointing to the door of the lodge. "We surely are being deserted wholesale this morning."

Jessie tried to plead with the black woman, but found her obdurate. Phrosy would like to accommodate Miss Jessie, she "sho would, but she wouldn't take a chance of hearin' dose ghosts again, no, suh, not fo' nobody."

Finally all that was left to them was to bid her good-bye and God-speed, which they did with a sigh. Burd and Fol volunteered to see her safe aboard the boat, and so the three girls were left alone.

They sat down on a pile of stones near the lodge and stared gloomily out toward the lake. Presently Amy giggled.

"As we look now we would make a perfectly

stunning group, entitled 'Gloom,'" she said. "Snap out of it, girls. Somebody say something cheerful."

"I don't feel like it," confessed Jessie, adding, crossly: "I think Darry is horrid to act the way he does."

"He is a pest," assented Amy, immediately. "The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"I'll tell you," said Nell, and they looked at her hopefully. "What do you say, we get Fol to drive us into Gibbonsville and find out what Darry is up to?"

Amy clapped her hands and applauded the idea, but Jessie looked doubtful.

"Wouldn't that be spying?" she asked, but Amy caught her up quickly.

"When anybody acts as queerly as Darry has lately, he deserves to be spied upon. After all, I guess we have as much right as he has to go to Gibbonsville if we want to," she added, with a giggle.

Jessie was still rather doubtful, but the other girls finally overruled her objections. After all, it would be a good thing if they could find out something about that mysterious girl in whom Darry seemed to take so much interest.

When Burd and Fol returned from the boat-landing, reporting that they had seen Phrosy

safely aboard, Nell drew Fol aside and engaged him in earnest conversation.

Jessie and Amy, watching with interest, saw him shake his head several times and thought the battle was lost. But after a while Nell approached them with a triumphant expression and announced that Fol had agreed to drive them down in the touring car any time they wanted to go.

"Better get started right away," said Amy, light-heartedly. "Mr. Darry may find that he hasn't a crowd of infants to deal with, after all."

They told Burd of their plans and asked him to go with them, but he refused with the frank admission that he was afraid of Darry.

"Huh, who's afraid of him!" sniffed Amy, as she snapped to the door of the car. "Darry is all bark. He couldn't bite if he tried."

Some time later, as they were nearing Gibbonsville, Jessie began to feel unpleasantly nervous. She was forced to acknowledge to herself that she was actually afraid to find out what Darry's mysterious business in this shabby little village might be. If she had dared, she would have begged Fol to take them back to Forest Lodge.

As they entered Gibbonsville Amy thought she caught a glimpse of Darry's car going down a side street and called out to Fol to follow it.

"I am sure that was his roadster. First street to the left, Fol."

When they reached the corner, Jessie saw, almost with a sensation of dismay, that Amy had been right. Directly ahead of them Darry's car had been parked by the roadside and Darry himself was descending from it.

Cautiously, Fol backed the touring car around the corner. It would spoil everything if Darry should see them now. Quickly Amy and Nell alighted, with Jessie lagging just a little behind them.

They were in time to see Darry's cordial greeting of the strange girl who had given Amy the counterfeit bill. He was holding both her hands in his and she was smiling up at him trustingly.

Amy started forward, but Jessie caught her arm and pulled her back.

"Let's get away!" she gasped. "I can't stay here any longer! We—we shouldn't have come!"

CHAPTER XVII

PAYMENT OF A DEBT

GRUMBLINGLY, Amy allowed Jessie to draw her away. Nell followed, and all climbed quickly into the car. In a moment they were off, burning up the road again in the direction of Forest Lodge.

Amy grumbled all the way back, but Jessie would hardly speak at all. She could not get the vision of Darry and that girl out of her mind. She wondered why it should hurt her so much to see his friendliness to some one else.

"You dragged me away before the last act," Amy complained. "Don't you know the best part was still to come—when we confronted the guilty man and maiden?"

"I didn't want to confront any one," Jessie returned, wearily. "And, besides, I don't believe Darry is guilty of anything."

"Well, we at least know he is guilty of friendship with a girl whose past, to say the least of it, is a trifle queer," retorted Amy. "Darry will certainly hear my idea of his actions when he gets back."

It was almost dark when Darry did finally return, and all that afternoon Jessie had been feverishly restless. She was unable to give her mind to anything. Even her beloved radio had lost much of its fascination for her, and she listened apathetically to a really fine concert from New York.

The other girls did not notice her mood, for the reason that they were considerably stirred up over the mystery of Darry's actions. Then, too, though they would not for the world have acknowledged this to each other, they were rather dreading the approach of dark. They could not, however much they tried, put from their minds the memory of that dreadful wailing lament which had reached their ears from the direction of the swamp. Constantly before them was the mental vision of those ghostly figures, flitting among the trees.

"Looks a good deal like having a ghost hunt this afternoon, I must say," Nell remarked once, as they scanned the mountain road for a sign of Darry's roadster. "I can't say that I relish spending another night here with those spooks wandering loose around the place."

"We can go now if you want to," Burd suggested. "There is still time to get to the swamp and back before dark, and perhaps you would

rest easier to-night if you could see that there was nothing alarming there."

"Ghosts aren't supposed to walk till after dark, anyway; so I don't see any use going down there just to look at the place," was Amy's ungracious response.

After that Burd and Fol left the girls to their own devices and went off to enjoy a little quiet fishing.

Later Amy declared she was tired after having slept so little the night before and went to lie down. Miss Alling was listening in to a concert, completely absorbed in her new fancy.

Jessie and Nell wandered down to the dock, embarked in their favorite green canoe, and drifted out upon the water.

It was there that Amy found them some time later when she came running down to the water's edge, waving something in her hand.

"You will never guess what I've got," she shouted, as the girls paddled nearer to the dock. "Darry is back and he brought me a present."

As Nell and Jessie clambered out of the canoe, they saw that Amy held in her hand something green that fluttered in the breeze.

"A bill!" exclaimed Jessie. "Where did you get that from, Amy Drew?"

"You needn't look as if I had robbed a bank or something," chuckled Amy. "I came by it

honestly, I assure you. Didn't you hear me say Darry gave me a present?"

"Well, you can tell Darry for me that if he is distributing five-dollar bills as recklessly as all that he can throw some in this direction," Nell remarked.

Jessie looked from the bill to Amy's mischievous face and presently light dawned upon her.

"Why did he give you that, Amy Drew?" she demanded, excitedly. "Tell me quickly before I go to Darry and ask him."

"That girl gave it to him," Amy confessed, lowering her tone to a mysterious whisper. "She told him to give it to me in exchange for the bad five-dollar bill."

"So Darry has turned into a reformer!" remarked Nell, in huge enjoyment. "Imagine inducing that girl to give good money for bad."

"Darry says she did not know the bill was bad," said Amy. But she added, with a giggle: "I think he is a poor simpleton, myself—allowing that girl to pull the wool over his eyes. Nobody can ever tell me again that I have a bright brother."

"Then he admits having seen the girl," said Jessie, thoughtfully. "Did you tell him about our trip to Gibbonsville?"

"No. He got in his innings first. When he handed me the bill and told me where it came

from I was so surprised I couldn't speak. When I had recovered Darry had disappeared."

"I think we had better not say anything about following him, then," suggested Jessie, as they neared the lodge. "It would only make him angry."

"I couldn't get him to tell me anything about the girl, not even her name," said Amy, regretfully. "I never saw such an annoying person! He is as close-mouthed as a clam!"

They found Aunt Emma, who hated to cook, in the lodge struggling with supper, and immediately set about helping her. It was fun to get the fire started and brown the ham to a golden crispness and fry the eggs till they looked like little white islands with a mound of gold in the center. In this pleasant occupation the girls forgot to miss Phrosy and forgot, for the moment, even to think of Phrosy's ghosts.

Burd and Fol, coming in a few moments later, cheerful and ravenous and triumphantly displaying a nice catch of fish, declared that they had never tasted so fine a dinner.

Afterward they listened in to a splendid radio concert and about nine o'clock realized with relief that the "ghosts" had not chosen to make themselves manifest on that night at least.

On the afternoon of the second day after the girls had trailed Darry to Gibbonsville, they were

tuning in to the wave length of the forest ranger station when there came suddenly to them, ringing along the airways, the words: "More men on the northeast section, sir. The fire is sweeping in a semicircle toward the north."

"A fire!" cried Jessie. "Oh, I wonder if it is anywhere near us."

"Listen, did you hear that?" cried Fol, excitedly. "The fire is a long way off——"

"Down at the other end of Lake Towako probably," agreed Darry. "They will have it in hand in no time, I bet. Watch and see."

"Listen and see, you mean," giggled Amy.

"Listen and hear would be still better," put in Nell, with a jolly laugh.

"Oh, listen to them," Jessie implored. "Isn't it wonderful how they can send messages to each other right out of the air?"

It was wonderful, and for the better part of two hours the young folks sat without stirring, thrilled to the depths of them by this battle between the greatest enemy of the forest, fire, and the ingenuity of man.

It was evidently quite a serious fire, and as it was coming steadily in their direction they were all much relieved when the success of the fire-fighters was announced over the radio.

"What heroes they must be, these forest rangers," said Jessie, when the air waves were

mute again. "Think what they have done in this last two hours—the property they have saved, and lives, too, maybe."

"I would have liked to see them at work," remarked Fol, musingly. "And, gee! wouldn't it be great to be in one of those airplanes?"

"I'm not so sure I'd like that," replied Darry, soberly.

"I think I will have to write a book about seeing a forest fire by radio," chuckled Amy. "It is almost as thrilling as being on the spot."

"And quite a good deal safer," laughed Burd.

CHAPTER XVIII

ALARMED

SO QUIET and peaceful and like old times had the last two days seemed that the Radio Girls were quite unprepared for Burd's announcement that he and Darry and Fol were about to desert the camp again.

"We feel we ought to go down to the swamp and investigate those spooks," said Darry, in response to their protests.

"But we haven't heard or seen anything lately," said Amy.

"If you go down there you may just succeed in stirring up the animals," added Nell.

"And I didn't hear any invitation for us to go along," said Jessie. "We want to, you know."

Darry smiled at her, but shook his head.

"We don't think you girls had better go until we have a chance to look about first," he said. "In our estimation, you are a great deal better off right here for the present."

"There you go! Mysterious again, Darry Drew!" said Amy, with a frown. "What do you

suppose could possibly hurt us down at that old swamp?"

"We don't know, and because we don't know we think it is better we prospect around a little by ourselves first," replied Darry, firmly.

"We will probably be back by to-night, anyway," said Fol, in what was meant to be reassurance.

"Folsom Duckworth, do you mean there is a possibility you *won't* be back to-night?" demanded Nell, in surprise, and Fol looked sheepish.

"Not a chance in the world," he answered. "What would keep us in a swamp overnight, I would like to know?"

"So would I!" retorted Nell, adding, with a sigh: "You boys do interest me strangely!"

Under protest the girls finally consented to fix a lunch for the three boys. They felt uneasy about this sudden expedition to the swamp and would have dissuaded the boys from undertaking it if they could have done so. However, they knew Darry well enough to be sure there was no changing his mind when it was once made up, and in this case they felt sure that Darry had originated and planned the whole thing.

It was with vague misgivings then, that they watched the boys go off on the narrow path that led toward the swamp.

"I don't understand it at all," said Jessie. "The

boys act so queerly and seem to have so many secrets from us."

"Darry must have put them up to this ghost-hunting trip," said Amy, voicing the thought that had troubled them all. "I caught him talking to Burd and Fol very seriously two or three times, and when they saw me they changed the subject—*pronto*. Oh, I know them—and I know Darry!"

"I used to think I did too," said Jessie, plaintively. "But lately he seems like some one else, and so do Burd and Fol. I can't make them out."

"I think there is more behind this trip than just the scare we had the other night," said Nell. "It seems to me the boys have some other reason for braving the horrors of the swamp just now."

"I tell you what we can do," suggested Amy, the ever-resourceful. "We can do some investigating on our own account!"

"You mean, follow the boys?" asked Nell, doubtfully.

"We will follow nothing but our own inclinations," retorted Amy. "I want to find those ghosts."

"Good! Suppose we pack us a lunch and get started right away!" from Jessie. "We may find out more about Phrosy's ghosts than the boys do before we get through."

Miss Alling helped them pack a lunch—though

they really had not the slightest intention of being gone more than an hour or two—and they were soon ready to start on their own prospecting expedition.

"This is the life!" cried Amy, as they swung along a rock-strewn sloping trail that led in the direction of the swamp. "The boys thought they would leave us at home to twiddle our thumbs, did they? We'll show them!"

But as they approached closer to the swamp and were enveloped by the damp, unpleasant vapor rising from it, their spirits underwent a decided slump. Nell and Amy held back, and finally Jessie was forced to wait for them to catch up to her.

"What is the matter? Not afraid of ghosts, are you?" she teased them. "Why, you haven't even seen any yet."

"I keep expecting to have them jump out at me from behind the bushes," confessed Nell. "I have a horrible feeling that those ghostly white figures are chasing us."

"Goodness, let's hurry then," said Amy, with a laugh and a nervous glance over her shoulder. "At the rate we are going they will surely catch up to us."

"I guess this is about where the swamp begins," said Jessie, sliding a foot about in the oozing mud. "See how rank the vegetation is."

"Here's a path—of a sort—that seems to lead through it, though," observed Nell.

"Come on, then," said Amy, with a nervous giggle. "It'll be no worse to be swallowed up by the swamp than to be scared to death by the ghosts."

Gingerly, they felt their way along the soft ground, expecting every moment that they might slip and find themselves mired in the oozing mud.

Finally, after half an hour of this sort of progress, they came to a place where the solid ground seemed to end. Before them and on both sides of them waved and beckoned the treacherous, too-green marsh grass. Jessie, stretching out a foot warily in search of firmer footing, drew back as the mud sucked greedily at her shoe.

"No use, I guess," she said reluctantly. "We'll have to go back and try some other way."

Carefully they retraced their steps, slipping now and then and clutching at one another in wild panic. Once they thought they had lost the trail. It was only a moment before they found the firmer ground again, but the absolute terror of those few seconds was unforgetable.

Once upon familiar ground again in the shelter of the forest, they could laugh at their panic, but even then they could not think of it without a shudder.

"I don't see why we went into the swamp, any-

way," remarked Nell, as they started slowly to circle the swamp. "Those horrid figures we saw were on the edge of the swamp, not in it."

"Well, we might as well look around here, anyway," replied Jessie.

"Though I don't in the least expect to see anything but our own shadows," added Amy, gloomily.

The forest seemed so unusually quiet and peaceful to the girls that they began to question whether they had not imagined that moaning, eerie cry, those white figures flitting among the trees near the swamp.

At last, tired and a little shaken by their experience in the swamp, they ate their lunch and returned to Forest Lodge.

Darkness came, and still the boys did not return. Night came, and morning, and still no word of them. How they managed to live through the hours of the long day that followed, the girls could never tell.

Another night they passed in Forest Lodge, and when the second morning dawned they were hollow-eyed and shaken with worry.

Miss Alling protested vigorously when they declared their decision of invading the swamp again in search of the boys. Once more she warned them of the dangers that lurked in that treacherous place.

"I would rather get lost in the swamp and die and have my bones bleached by the sun than spend another minute worrying," said Amy.

"I will take my compass with me, anyway," Jessie promised.

"A compass is your very best friend in the woods," Miss Alling admitted.

Clad in their knicker suits with leather leggings to protect them from the scratches of thorns and twigs, carrying with them a liberal supply of sandwiches and fruit, the Radio Girls set out to trail the boys.

They did not linger on the way, but went swiftly down the narrow trail toward the swamp, intent upon their purpose. After the long and anxious wait, action of any sort meant relief to them.

As they approached the swampy ground the vegetation became profuse and rank and the earth turned slimy underfoot. There was a musty, unpleasant odor, such as they had noticed two days before, arising from the marshes. Knowing that the trail they had followed on that unsuccessful invasion of the swamp was a false one, they turned sharply to their left on this occasion, choosing their steps with even greater care than before.

"I wonder if this is the direction the boys took," said Amy, when they stopped on a small rise of ground to catch their breath before hurrying on.

"I'd hate to think we were wasting time by going in the wrong direction."

"I am sure we are right so far," Jessie reassured her, consulting the compass in her hand. "They started due south, and up to this point the trail is quite plain."

"The question now seems to be, where do we go from here?" remarked Nell, looking about her with distaste at the sea of rank grass and vegetation. "If we make a false step we may find ourselves up to our necks in mud."

For some distance the ground remained soft and slimy. Then they came to a comparatively solid trail over which they could proceed more rapidly.

Suddenly, ahead of her through the thinning trees and vegetation, Jessie saw something that brought her to a halt.

Out on a rise of solid ground, such as were scattered over the swamp like tiny islands in a lake, was a queer-looking hut. The windows of the hut, seen from that distance, appeared no bigger than the portholes of a ship.

A flat scow or raft lay close to this "island," as though it were used to carry occupants of the hut back and forth to the shore.

Jessie beckoned to the other girls, and as they joined her several disreputable-looking men and women emerged from the hut and, embarking

upon the raft, pushed out from the island in the direction of the shore.

"Now what do you think of that?" demanded Amy, but Jessie pressed an urgent, silencing hand over her mouth. The appearance of those men and women on the raft warned her that it would never do to make known their presence in that vicinity.

Suddenly a faint sound reached their ears, seeming to come from a long distance. It was a cry for help.

"That was Darry's voice!" cried Jessie, trembling.

CHAPTER XIX

IN DANGER

THE girls listened, clinging together, scarcely daring to breathe, and the cry was repeated, fainter and coming abruptly to an end.

"Darry! Darry!" cried Amy, in a sudden, terrible fear. "That was his voice, Jessie! He is in trouble! He may be hurt, dying——"

As though driven to recklessness by the thought, Amy turned and dashed blindly ahead, sinking suddenly almost to her knees in mud and water.

Jessie and Nell dragged her out, only quick action saving them all from being sucked down into the merciless black slime.

"Oh, I am sorry, Jess—Nell!" said Amy, sobbing in her fright and remorse. "I might have killed you both! I won't do it again. But, girls, we must find Darry!"

"The ground is harder over here," cried Jessie, her words coming quick and staccato through chattering teeth. "Come this way."

She dashed madly through the underbrush and entangling vines, catching her clothes on bushes

and tearing them recklessly. Nell and Amy followed her blindly, the echo of that haunting cry for help flogging them onward.

Their hands and faces were scratched and bleeding, their clothes torn in a hundred places, and still they went on. Once Amy became so helplessly entangled in the rank undergrowth that Nell and Jessie were forced to stop and spend precious minutes in the effort to tear her loose.

Again, Jessie, setting the pace, missed her footing on the solid ground and sank into the yielding mud. Luckily, Amy and Nell were close behind her, and with a strength born of desperation pulled her back to a safe footing.

At times they stopped and listened again for Darry's voice. But no repetition of that cry came to guide them, and they could only struggle on blindly, pantingly, trusting that another hundred yards would bring them to him.

Still no sign of him, and they paused exhausted, to gather strength for a further search. They looked at each other for the first time and wanted to cry at the pitiful picture they made.

Covered with mud, clothes torn, hair hanging stringy and wild from contact with twigs and bushes, faces scratched and bleeding, they themselves might easily have been mistaken for the ones in need of rescue.

But after that one startled look they returned frantically to Darry's need of help.

"We seem so utterly helpless," Amy cried despairingly. "We might wander around forever like this and never find him. We have nothing to guide us—nothing!"

"Come on," urged Jessie. "I am sure the cry came from this direction. If we go on, we have a chance of finding him. If we stand still we have none."

So on again, discouragement and despair growing as they pushed farther and farther into the tangled vegetation of the swamp.

At last, when even Jessie had begun to acknowledge they had failed, they heard voices. They stopped short, fearful lest the owners of them might be some of the men and women from the hut in the swamp.

The voices were masculine and carefully guarded. Creeping closer, Amy suddenly gave a cry of delight and flung herself forward. When Jessie and Nell followed they found her in the act of embracing the astonished Burd, while Fol stood by looking on incredulously.

There were many questions to be asked and answered on both sides, but they hurried the explanations, goaded on by the thought of Darry and his need of them.

The two boys, it seemed, had been hunting

ceaselessly for their missing chum since the morning of the first day they had spent in the swamp, when Darry had become separated from them and disappeared as completely as though he had been spirited away by gnomes.

At first they had not been alarmed, thinking that they must soon come upon him, but as the hours passed and still no sign of him, they had become greatly worried. That, said Burd, was where the real search began.

"But we just heard him now!" cried Amy. "He was calling for help, and it sounded as if he were a long distance off."

Burd nodded and rubbed the stubbly beard which had begun to put in an appearance, the result of two days of neglect.

"That was Darry, all right," he said. "If he had only kept on shouting we might have had some chance of finding him."

"Sounded to us as if that last cry was choked off," said Nell gravely.

"Probably Darry tried to yell again but they wouldn't let him," put in Fol.

"Who do you mean by 'they?' " asked Jessie. Burd looked at her and saw how white her face was beneath the scratches and mud.

"The people in the hut out there in the swamp," he answered. "Did you see it as you came along?"

The girls assured him that they had noticed the hut and asked him eagerly what he and Fol knew about the people who lived there.

"They seem a rough set, and that is all we know for a fact," responded Fol.

"We will tell you all about that hut later on," said Burd, turning eagerly toward that part of the swamp and forest which they had not already explored. "Just now, I think we had better stir ourselves again. I have a feeling in my bones that we are getting close to Darry."

It occurred to Jessie that the boys must want food after their two harassed days in the open, and she offered them some of the sandwiches they had brought along.

Burd and Fol accepted eagerly, but they would not let hunger delay them. They munched at the food as they plodded on through the swamp, hoping always that they would come upon Darry's trail.

"Look here—see what I have found!" called Jessie, suddenly, and she held up a piece of torn cloth that had caught upon a bush. She was trembling so with excitement that she could hardly speak.

"It is part of Darry's jacket!" she went on. "Look, Amy. You know it is, don't you?"

"It is, it is!" cried Amy, pressing the bit of cloth hysterically to her face. "Darry, Darry,

what have they done to you? If they dared to hurt you I would——" She clenched her fist threateningly and Burd took her by the arm, gently leading her on.

"Come on. I have an idea," he said eagerly. "That piece of cloth may mean a lot, if my suspicion is correct, Jess. Look here!"

He stooped and picked up some pieces of loose paper from the ground.

"These are from Darry's notebook. Am I right, Amy?"

Amy took the pieces of paper and examined them.

"They come from Darry's notebook, all right," she said. "He always uses that same blue paper in his notebook."

"Then he is marking a trail!" Jessie's voice was feverishly eager. "This is the first clue we have had. Come on, let's follow it."

At Burd's suggestion, they scattered in several directions, searching eagerly, and it was Nell who finally picked up the trail again some hundred feet further on. There were more loose sheets of the same bluish paper, and again they were identified by Amy as belonging to the notebook that Darry invariably carried with him.

The trail thus marked led sharply off from the path they had been following, diverging from it almost at a right angle. Without hesitation the

girls and boys prepared to follow this clue, even though it seemed to lead them continually deeper into the heart of the woods.

For a considerable distance the trail remained fairly plain. It was evident that whoever Darry's captors were, they had left his hands—or at least one hand—free, and in this way he had ingeniously contrived to mark out the winding path through the woods.

Then, suddenly, all clues abruptly ceased. Although they searched frantically for a long distance in all directions they found nothing that could tell them where Darry had gone from there. Once more he had disappeared utterly and completely.

"I suppose they found out what he was doing at this point," said Burd, gloomily. "Tied his hands, probably. Poor, old Darry! Now we *are* up a tree!"

Without plan or direction, they wandered on, hoping less and less confidently as time went by that Fate would reveal to them Darry's whereabouts.

At last, when they were almost dropping with fatigue, they came upon a little hut hidden in the dense foliage. They were suspicious of it at first, thinking it might be the property of people like those they had seen in the swamp. But, realizing

finally that it was deserted, they approached warily.

"Why, here is a radio set inside!" Jessie suddenly called out, in the tone of one greeting an old friend. "Come on in while I hear what it has to say."

Evidently she heard something unpleasant, for, as they crowded to the door of the hut, Jessie turned toward them, the headphones dangling loosely from her fingers and a look of dread on her face.

"There is a fire!" she cried. "And it must be close to here."

CHAPTER XX

THE FIRE

THE others stared at Jessie incredulously for a moment. Then Amy rushed forward and grasped one of the phones. Suddenly the dread in Jessie's face spread to hers.

"It must be a terrible fire! They are calling out the reserves!" she exclaimed.

"What shall we do?" cried Nell. "We don't know which way to run!"

"Let me pass, please," cried an authoritative voice, and a forest ranger dashed past them and rushed up to the radio set. The young folks watched him with fascinated interest.

The ranger listened for a moment with furrowed brow, then, by means of the sending apparatus with which the hut was also equipped, sent back word to the station that the orders had been heard and would be obeyed.

Then he looked at the young folks as though seeing them for the first time.

"Better get out of here, quick!" he commanded, in the curt tones of one who has not a moment

to waste. "Fire sweeping in this direction. Worst one in years. Run for it."

"But where, where?" cried Jessie, catching his sleeve, as he was hurrying out again. "Where shall we go?"

"Straight down to the lake, keep facing northwest," commanded the ranger. "Better get out on the lake if you have boats. Fire apt to sweep the water front if we don't get busy. Run!" With these words he turned and dashed from the hut.

Following him out into the open, the girls and boys saw him join a group of rangers, all fully equipped for fire fighting. He shouted a command to the men, and they turned and ran through the woods away from the lake.

"They are going to beat the fire back!" gasped Jessie, as they started on a run in the general direction of the water. "Poor Darry, we can't even look for him now!"

"Look at that smoke!" cried Nell, pointing to a heavy black cloud that swirled above the trees and seemed to be bearing down upon them.

"The fire must be gaining on us!" sobbed Amy, as she pushed steadily on through the nightmare branches and entangling vines. "Suppose we can't reach the lake!"

"We must reach it!" said Jessie, in a hard

voice that she did not recognize as hers at all. "Let's run, can't we?"

It was then she discovered something that Burd had valiantly kept from them up to that time. He limped, and one foot seemed to drag painfully behind him.

"Burd, you are hurt!" she cried, in quick concern. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"It isn't anything," the young fellow assured her, trying to summon up his old cheerful grin. "Caught my ankle in the root of a tree this morning and took a pretty header. Serves me right for not watching my step."

"Oh, but that is dreadful, Burd!" cried Amy, forgetful momentarily of their danger, and even of Darry, in sympathy for him. "You must have been in agony, dragging all these miles with a sprained ankle."

"Just wrenched, that's all. Don't worry about it," said Burd, limping on. But the girls saw that his mouth was set in a straight line and his eyes were clouded with pain.

Fol and Nell were already out of sight. Fol knew nothing of Burd's plight, or he would, of course, have stayed to help him.

Back of them there was a distant crackling sound, the pungent odor of burning wood filled their nostrils, choking them.

Jessie gave a quick glance over her shoulder

and caught her breath. A thin fork of red had rent for a moment the curtain of smoke. The fire was gaining on them!

"Lean on me, Burd, do," she said, breathlessly. "Amy will take the other side, and we can help you. That's the way."

Some new and urgent quality in her voice caused Burd also to look behind. He shut his eyes and groaned.

"You will have to go on, girls," he said. "The fire is gaining fast. This foot—I can't go any faster."

"We are not going any faster than you can go, Burd Alling," Amy flashed out at him fiercely. "Do you think for a moment we would go and leave you? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"I am," said Burd, with an imitation of his old grin.

The next moment he stumbled heavily and fell into a hole caused by the uprooting of a giant tree. When the girls bent over him he grimaced with pain.

"Better go on," he said. "Done for the old ankle this time, I guess. Feels sort of busted up generally."

"But, Burd, you must try to get up. You must, you must!" cried Amy, shaking him desperately. "We will help you. You can lean on Jessie and

me. That horrible smoke. It—is—choking me—" She broke off, half-strangled, and Burd, with Jessie's aid, struggled to his feet.

He said no word as they helped him out of the hole and to solid ground again, but his lips were white with pain.

"Come on," he said, limping ahead, manfully, though he alone knew how much that effort cost him. "There is a lot of fight left in the old carcass yet. Got the compass, Jess? That's right. All you have to do is to keep us steered in the right direction."

They could hear the roar of the flames now, the voices of the fire-fighters as they urged each other on. Above the scene of battle hovered the airplanes, watching keenly the progress of the fire, directing each step in the fight. The whirring of their engines, like the noise of gigantic beetles, came faintly to the ears of Jessie and Amy as, with the crippled Burd, they struggled onward toward the haven of the water.

It seemed to them as though the forest had suddenly become a sentient thing, reaching out horrible nightmare fingers to halt their progress, pushing them backward toward the fire and destruction.

At last came a hoarse, triumphant cry from Jessie.

"The water—over there, through the trees!" she sobbed. "We are safe—safe!"

The sight of that water was deceptive, for they still had a weary way to go before reaching the protection of it. But it was possible now to see their progress, and Burd, with the anxious encouragement of Jessie and Amy, nerved himself for that last great effort.

"There is the lodge," gasped Amy, pushing the hair back from her face. "Tell me I am not dreaming, Jess, Burd. It is the lodge, isn't it?"

"Thank heaven—yes," groaned Burd, adding, as they pressed forward: "You girls are bricks. I won't forget it. Ouch! Confound that rock——"

"We will have it removed before you come this way again," said Amy, with a choked little laugh. "There is Aunt Emma, waiting for us, bless her."

"Home! I thought we would never see it again!" cried Jessie, huskily, as Miss Alling rushed to them, forcing Burd to lean upon her shoulder and relieving the exhausted girls.

They reached the lodge and found Nell and Fol inside, hastily packing their belongings.

"Is it—as bad as that?" asked Jessie, as she flung herself into a chair and covered her burning eyes with smoke-stained fingers. "Shall we have to leave the lodge, Aunt Emma?"

"I hope not, my dear," returned Miss Alling, briskly. "We are only preparing for that emergency. The fire, with the impetus it has gained, may sweep down to the lake front, and in that case our only safe refuge will be the boats."

"The radio—we must save that," cried Jessie, feverishly, springing to her feet. "Oh, we must hurry—hurry——"

"We have it almost packed, Jess, dear," said Nell, who had been fussing over Burd and lamenting the fact that she and Fol had not known of his crippled ankle. "I have it nearly dismantled, and Fol has been carefully packing the parts."

"One can always depend on Nell," said Amy, as she bestirred herself wearily to help in the packing. "What do we do next?"

Aunt Emma answered the question in a brief and efficient manner, and it was only a short time before everything was in readiness for a quick retreat to the lake in case such an action became necessary.

"Guess we can't do any more, Jess," said Amy, soberly, as she joined her chum at a window that commanded a view of the burning forest. "Our game will have to be a waiting one from now on."

"That is the most horrible part of it," cried Jessie, in a fierce whisper. "To have to stay here and watch—and do nothing! Amy, I can't bear it!"

CHAPTER XXI

A TERRIBLE BATTLE

"WHAT shall we do about Darry?" cried Jessie, despairingly, as the Radio Girls stood arm in arm before the door of the lodge watching the terrifying progress of the fire. "If he has been imprisoned in the path of that fire——"

"Please, don't, Jess!" implored Amy, shrinking back as a breath of hot wind fanned her face. "I can't bear to think of my poor brother. If only we could have found him before the fire started!"

"Don't go on believing the very worst," chided Nell, gently. "He may have been imprisoned in that hut we saw in the swamp for all we know."

"But the trail led away from it," objected Amy.

"They may have doubled back on their tracks, just to elude pursuit," said Jessie, eagerly willing to grasp at the smallest hope.

"I wonder if swamp grass burns," said Amy.

Before any one could respond, the hot breath of the fire enveloped them, driving them toward the lake. The roar of the burning timber was

terrifyingly loud and the smoke rolled toward them in a dense black cloud.

The girls put their hands before their smarting eyes and retreated still farther toward the lake. Through blurred vision they saw Fol dash from the lodge with Burd limping painfully after him.

They ran forward and intercepted the boys, demanding what they were going to do.

"Fight the fire, of course," replied Fol, pulling impatiently away from their restraining hands. "I guess the rangers need every man they can get."

"But you, Burd! You aren't fit to go," protested Amy. "Your foot——"

"I have forgotten all about my foot," retorted Burd, with a grimness altogether new to him. "After the fire is over will be time enough to remember it."

"If you can go, so can we!" cried Jessie, her eyes suddenly blazing with purpose.

"That's the idea!" cried Amy and Nell, eagerly, and the boys paused for a moment to regard them admiringly.

"You girls are the real stuff, all right," said Burd, and Fol added:

"Come along, and maybe they will have a gunny sack or two to spare."

The girls did not understand this reference, but they were soon to have it explained to them.

They battled their way through the increasingly heavy smoke and the scorching heat to the first line of the fire-fighters.

There men worked like fiends with the sweat streaming down their soot-stained faces, blood-shot eyes strained and set and determined. They worked with pick and shovel and hose and wet gunny sacks, chopping down ruthlessly branches of trees that were in the path of the fire, digging trenches in the earth to balk the darting flames, beating out with the sodden sacks little creeping hungry streams of fire that wriggled snakelike through the underbrush, the foreguard of fresh terror and destruction.

It was to this last task that the girls found themselves assigned. The forest rangers made no question of their presence there, merely taking time from their own fierce labors to motion to the gunny sacks.

The girls needed no further permission or instruction. Fired by the dauntless spirit of the men about them, stirred to fierce anger by the relentless onrush of the fire, they felt themselves suddenly incapable of fatigue or of fear.

Smoke burned their eyes, their throats were parched and dry. They tried to swallow and found their tongues swollen to twice the normal size.

Still they fought on, laying their dry and

scorched sacks upon a pile of others and accepting new and sodden ones from the supply being constantly rushed to the spot by the rangers.

In spite of all they could do they were losing, were being pushed back slowly but steadily toward the water. The wind, gentle at first, was increasing in volume. It looked as though the entire water front was doomed to go.

"Look!" gasped Amy, hoarsely, grasping Jessie's arm and pointing upward. "The top branches of these trees have caught! We can't fight it, up there."

The order was given and they retreated some twenty yards. The work was to be done all over again, new trenches dug, new branches hacked away, more fighting of those insidious ribbons of flame darting slyly through the underbrush.

"Come on, Nell," cried Jessie, hoarsely, brandishing her sack. "See where the fire is spreading over there? Quick!"

Nell followed her, and together they beat out that fresh assault. They rested for a moment, panting, only to rush to another spot where the flames had gained a foothold.

They caught sight of the boys now and then, and their hearts swelled with pride as they saw the look upon their faces and the gallant way they fought shoulder to shoulder with the older men.

If Darry were only there, in his place, beside them! Oh, where was Darry?

Once when they stopped to gain a breath they were surprised to see Miss Alling rushing up to them. On her face was the determined expression they had come to know so well.

"They need more men out here," Miss Alling shouted. "And when it comes to work I am as good as any man." And as though to prove her words she went to work with a will and a fresh new energy that further inspired the tired girls.

Suddenly it seemed that they were gaining ground. The wind had shifted and was bearing the flames backward over the charred and ravaged territory.

The rangers closed in, working fiercely to make the most of this advantage, striving to conquer the flames before the fickle wind could change again.

Sacks hung limply from tired fingers, every nerve and muscle quivered with fatigue. The girls rested, convinced that the battle was all but won.

"Do I look as bad as I feel?" asked Amy, vainly trying to stretch her cracked and parched lips into some semblance of a smile. "I can't make my muscles behave."

"My eyes!" moaned Nell.

"You girls worked like Trojans!"

It was Burd's voice, and they turned to find

him regarding them with bloodshot but approving eyes.

"Do you think the worst of it is over?" asked Jessie, looking out toward the flames, which, unconquered, still roared upward.

"If the wind doesn't change again we are safe enough," said Burd. "The fire won't find much to feed on in the burned territory."

"Oh, but look at that!" cried Amy, in sudden new terror. "It is coming this way again. The wind has changed!"

A startled glance proved that she was right. The fickle wind swept the flames again in their direction. The tongues of fire reached out eagerly, lapping at the branches as though the temporary lull had merely whetted its appetite.

"Girls, Burd, Fol—look over there!" almost screamed Jessie, as she pointed toward the swamp. "That crowd of people!"

Like rats swarming from the hold of a burning ship, men and women were pouring from the forest, running toward the lake. Between two rough and bearded men was a tall familiar figure.

"Darry!" cried Jessie, in a tone that mounted above the roaring of the fire. "It is Darry! Can't you see?"

CHAPTER XXII

THE ESCAPE

THERE was a sudden commotion in the motley crowd. The tall figure between the two rough-looking men wrenched suddenly free, and dashed, head down, toward the lake.

One or two made a faint-hearted attempt to stop him, put out a hand or a leg to trip him. The men who had been his captors started in pursuit, but the hot breath of the fire enveloped them and drove them toward the safety of the water.

Darry—for there was no doubt now that it was he—kept on running in the direction of the lodge, and the girls and boys, forgetful of everything but joy at the sight of him, dropped everything and ran to meet him.

It was Amy who reached him first, and she flung herself into his arms and clung to him, sobbing hysterically.

"Darry, Darry, where have you been? We thought they had killed you! We looked for you everywhere!"

Darry patted her reassuringly and gently unclasped her arms from about his neck. The others had reached them by this time and had flung themselves upon Darry with a score of eager questions.

He held them off laughingly and motioned toward the scene of the fire.

"Never mind about me," he said. "I can tell you my experiences later, after the fire is conquered. Looks as if we were pretty badly needed over there."

It needed only one hasty glance over their shoulders to assure them that he was right. The fire, with the impetus of the wind behind it, was sweeping onward with renewed vigor. Once more the lodge and all the buildings along the lake front were menaced.

Led by Darry, the young folks returned once more to the fight. They longed to ask him questions and have them answered, but during that next strenuous hour there was time for nothing but concerted desperate effort to fight off the encroaching flames.

Where the fire had crept forward steadily, but slowly, before, it now leaped ahead, seeming to mock at the puny efforts of the men who sought to defeat it.

It ran up into branches of trees over their heads, reached scorching fingers across the

trenches dug to stay its advance, crackled gleefully in the dry and brittle underbrush.

Once Jessie felt a touch on her arm and looked up to see Darry standing beside her.

"Better get back to the lodge," he said. "It won't be long before we'll have to take to the water."

"Things are all packed and ready to put into the boats," she told him gaspingly. "Don't want to go back—till we have to, Darry."

"Good sports, you girls," muttered Darry, and reached for the pick with which he had been helping dig a new trench.

It was all of no use. The girls realized that even before Miss Alling gave definite orders to return to the lodge. The fire was gaining so rapidly that it was only a matter of a short time before they would be forced to abandon the lodge.

Wearily they turned away while the forest rangers still fought on with grim determination. They would not give up the battle until the last defense had fallen.

Once within the lodge, Burd sank into a chair with a groan of pain he could no longer suppress. But even then, when the girls wanted to take off his boot and examine the injured ankle, he would not let them.

"Time enough for that," he said, in almost the

same words Darry had used, "when the fire is out."

The dancing flames of the fire filled the interior of the lodge with a weird red glow. The air was heavy and thick with the stifling smoke.

"Better take to the boats right away," said Darry, coming in from a last survey of the burning forest. "The air in here is getting pretty rank."

"The radio first, girls," said Jessie, gathering up as much of the dismantled apparatus as she could carry. "We can come back for our clothes later on."

They were carrying the first load of things into the open when Amy noticed that the air was not so thick with smoke. With a cry of elation she called Jessie's attention to the fact that once more the wind had shifted.

"And it is starting to rain!" exclaimed Fol, showing them a large drop on the back of his hand. "Now, that is what I call luck!"

The rain fell gently at first, but finally came down in a sheeting torrent that hissed into the boiling caldron of the fire and eventually reduced it to a sea of smoldering embers.

Forest Lodge was saved! In the grip of reaction and utter weariness, the girls and boys reëntered the lodge, dropped into the big chairs, and propped weary heads on blistered and blackened hands.

Miss Alling, seeing the state of affairs, herself perilously near the point of exhaustion, bound up their injuries, treated Burd's swollen and painful ankle, and then packed them all off to bed.

For once they were all glad to obey her, and from then until long past dinner time that evening, they slept heavily, exhaustedly.

The rain which had proved their salvation continued to beat down soddenly, and when Jessie finally opened her eyes she thought they had never looked upon so dreary a prospect.

Through her window, she could see, from where she lay upon the bed, the blackened, ravaged trunks of what had once been monarchs of the forest. The smoke from wet embers still depressingly filled the air and the rain beat down with a steady, monotonously mournful sound.

Slowly the kaleidoscopic events of the day came back to her, and when she thought of Darry and realized that he was no longer in danger but safe with the boys in the cottage only a few feet away, her depression vanished magically and she ran into the other room to shake the still-sleeping Amy into wakefulness.

"Ouch, my arm hurts," grumbled Amy, reluctantly opening one eye. "Oh, it's you, Jess," she added, showing a little more animation. "What do you want? Is the forest on fire again?"

At the word "fire," Nell sat up with a start

and a cry of alarm but, reassured by the sound of the storm, turned and smiled at the girls sheepishly.

"Listen!" Jessie commanded suddenly, as there came to her the sounds of footsteps without and the opening of the front door. "There are the boys, I guess."

"They smelled the dinner cooking," said Amy, still in a grumbling humor. "They never come near us unless they have something to gain by it."

They found the boys in high spirits, despite the fact that singed hair and eyebrows, an occasional bandaged hand or ear and Burd's swollen and painful ankle made vivid reference to the perils of that day.

The girls were quick to sense beneath their hilarity an undercurrent of intense excitement.

"Look where the conquering heroines come," Burd greeted them, trying to rise and sinking back again with an exclamation of annoyance at the sharp twinge in his ankle.

"Heroines!" repeated Jessie, with a chuckle. "We feel more like the battered victims of a wreck."

CHAPTER XXIII

SUSPICION

"THAT is some wreck out there, for a fact," said Darry, soberly, as he waved a hand in the direction of the desolate forest. "I reckon that fire has done thousands of dollars worth of damage."

"We may be very thankful it didn't wipe out Forest Lodge, as well," said Aunt Emma, coming from the kitchen at that moment and bearing a huge tray laden with johnnycake. "We might be huddled in the boats now, wondering what to do next, instead of sitting snug and safe in here——"

"Eyeing the most delicious platter of cornbread ever evolved by a cook," finished Jessie, gayly.

"I vote we do something more than eye it," cried Fol. "Come on, fellows, let's get next to that cornbread!"

There were chicken croquets besides and a steaming dish of boiled potatoes and a bowl of peaches for dessert.

After dinner, seated cozily about the grate fire, the girls could no longer restrain their curiosity.

"If you keep us waiting another minute to tell us what you did down at that swamp, I am quite certain I shall explode," said Amy, decidedly.

"We have seen quite enough wreckage to-day without your starting something," declared Burd. There were signs of impatience on the girls' part at this speech, so he asked quickly: "What is it you would like to know, fair ones?"

"Oh, Burd, you are exasperating!" cried Jessie, impatiently, adding, as she turned to Darry: "Aren't you ever going to tell us about those awful people who captured you, Darry, and all the rest of it? You must know how eager we are to know what really happened."

"It is a pretty long story, and not all of it is exactly pleasant," returned Darry, gravely, his gaze fixed steadily on the leaping flames in the fireplace. "You must have thought my actions for the past week or two rather—er—curious."

The girls exchanged glances and Amy said dryly:

"You don't know the half of it, Darry."

"You remember Link Mullen up at college, don't you, Burd?" Darry asked with apparent irrelevance. "The dark one with the eyebrow moustache—friend of Monty Reid?"

"Link—of course I remember Link," returned Burd, his gaze introspective. "Sporty guy, rather too fond of hitting the high spots?"

Darry nodded. His expression was still unusually grave. The girls listened silently not daring to interrupt him lest he retire once more into that baffling shell of reticence which had puzzled them so long.

"That is Link all right," he said. "Kind-hearted, you know, and a good fellow, the life of a party and all that. But his sister worried about him, tried to cut him off too much conviviality, midnight parties and such things."

"His sister!" exclaimed Jessie. "Oh, Darry, then that tall girl was——"

"Link Mullen's sister," agreed Darry.

"But how did she come to be in New Melford and, later, in Gibbonsville?" cried Amy, and Darry gestured impatiently.

"Give me time. I was coming to that," he protested. "Link and his sister—their parents are dead, and they live with their guardian, who is in South America at present—had a quarrel, and the girl ran away from home, declaring that if Link intended to ruin himself she did not intend to stay around and watch him do it."

"Must have been a bird of a quarrel," murmured Burd, appreciatively. "Go ahead, old man, what happened next?"

"The girl kept her word and slipped away the next day, taking only a grip with her and leaving no word as to her destination."

"But where do you come in, Darry?" asked Jessie, softly.

"Right about here," returned the boy, smiling at her. "Link was pretty much cut up, and he came to me and asked me to help him find his sister. Of course I said I would, but I hadn't the least idea in the world how I was going to do it."

"You knew her by sight, then, did you?" asked Amy.

"Link had brought her up to one or two of the college affairs," replied Darry. "He was mighty proud and fond of her."

"But not proud or fond enough to reform for her sweet sake," remarked Amy dryly.

"I imagine this has been a lesson to him. He told me that if he was ever lucky enough to get Eileen back he would never do another thing to cross her as long as he lived. He was afraid she might be tempted to do something desperate, you see."

"I guess he was right. If you could call passing counterfeit five-dollar bills desperate," remarked Amy, and Darry took her up quickly.

"That is just the point," he countered. "The girl didn't know the bill was counterfeit."

"That is what they all say," remarked Amy, unconvinced. Jessie broke in before Darry could voice his exasperation.

"How did she happen to get this bill, Darry?" she asked quietly. Darry turned to her with a gesture of relief.

"She befriended a strange woman, prevented her being run over when she was crossing the street. Eileen told me when I hunted her up at Gibbonsville that the woman seemed to be in a befuddled condition, whether from liquor or drugs she could not say, and she had given Eileen in return for her service a five-dollar bill."

"The counterfeit!" cried Amy, dramatically. "At last we are on the trail!"

"We were!" Darry unexpectedly agreed with her. "Amazed at the magnificence of this gift for so comparatively small a service, Eileen made inquiries and found that the woman in all probability was a member of a gang who had been suspected at different times of trying to pass counterfeit money——"

"And so Eileen presented me with her counterfeit bill!" remarked Amy, ignoring Darry's irritated glare. "Pretty clever work, I should say."

"Link's sister had already asked you to change the bill before she found out—or rather, suspected—that it was counterfeit," he told her coldly.

"If she was so honest what made her run away that time when we saw her in Gibbonsville?" asked Amy, still not completely convinced. "She could have stood her ground then and given me

the good five-dollar bill as well as to hand it to you later."

"Oh, Amy, don't you see how different that is?" Jessie cried eagerly. "When this girl saw us she had no way of knowing we were friendly!"

As a matter of fact, we weren't," said Nell. "We were all inclined to be suspicious of her, thought she must be a member of some counterfeiting gang."

"Of course! And, thinking that, she didn't know but what we might try to have her arrested. Later when Darry found her and was so friendly she was encouraged to do what she had probably wanted to do for a long time—make good that counterfeit bill," said Jessie, earnestly.

Again Darry gave her a grateful glance.

"Well go ahead, Darry. There is still considerable mystery to unravel. What became of the woman who gave Eileen the counterfeit bill?"

"Ah, now you come to the real point of this yarn," said Burd. "You sure did ask a leading question that time, Amy."

"From Eileen's description," Darry continued, "I thought I recognized the woman as one whom I had seen in Gibbonsville talking with some rough-looking men. I did a little sleuthing on my own account and finally trailed the woman and her companions in the direction of Forest Lodge."

"Forest Lodge!" they cried, and instinctively

glanced about at the shadows that pressed in upon them.

"Go on, Darry," urged Jessie, eagerly. "I believe I begin to see light."

"You found out about that hut in the swamp!" cried Nell. "Now, I know why you were so anxious to investigate Phrosy's ghosts!"

"Hold on, hold on!" begged Amy, rubbing a hand across a troubled forehead. "You proceed too swiftly for me, as Miss Seymour would remark. My poor intelligence refuses to follow your drift."

"You see, it was like this," said Burd, taking the story away from Darry and speaking swiftly. "Darry did find out that this woman and her companions came from the hut in the swamp, and he got it into his well-oiled brain pan that this unpleasant abode was the home of counterfeiters——"

"An ideal one I must say," murmured Amy. "Absolutely safe from intrusion."

"Ideal, as you say," agreed Burd. "And if it had not been for Darry, the invincible sleuth-hound, it might have remained absolutely safe from intrusion to the end of time. He confided to Fol and me his suspicions, and we immediately decided to investigate the inhabitants of the mysterious hut."

"And you never told us a word about it!"

complained Amy. "That is what I call just plain mean."

"All the time you said you were going to investigate the queer noises from the swamp, you were after the counterfeiters!" exclaimed Jessie, excitedly.

"Not on your life!" Fol chuckled. "When we said we were after ghosts, we were after ghosts."

"And, by George," announced Burd, emphatically, "we found 'em, too!"

CHAPTER XXIV

IMPRISONED

UNCONSCIOUSLY the girls moved their chairs nearer to the glowing fire, clasped hands for reassurance of earthly presence. They looked at the boys curiously, yet fearfully.

"You found the ghosts!" repeated Jessie, incredulously. "Darry, what does he mean by that?"

Darry chuckled.

"Just what he says, I guess," he returned, adding quickly, as excitement gripped him again: "When I told the fellows about the hut in the swamp we got to wondering if those ghostly manifestations might not possibly come from the same source——"

"Oh, oh, oh, I just thought of something!" cried Jessie, and the boys looked at her expectantly. Her eyes were dancing with excitement. "Those sheets in the house we passed the day we got lost coming home from the ranger station!"

"Bright girl," applauded Fol. "Once more you have hit the nail right on the head."

"I will hit something beside a nail on the head

if you don't tell me what you are talking about," threatened Amy. "What in the world have sheets——"

"To do with ghosts?" finished Nell, as excited by this time as Jessie. "Why, Amy, I am ashamed of you. A child could answer that question."

"Then you think that the sheets we saw hanging in the room of that strange house have something to do with the ghostly figures cavorting around near the camp that night Phrosy got so scared?" asked Amy, incredulously, and the boys nodded, laughing at her disbelief.

"We are practically certain that the whole thing was simply a sham, a clumsy device employed by the people in the hut to prevent investigation."

"Then you think counterfeit money is actually made there?" asked Jessie.

"Unfortunately, I can't be sure," and Darry shook his head ruefully. "I used that old scow of theirs to get over to the hut and I was just in the act of finding out several interesting things when a man came around the back of the hut and nabbed me."

"That was when you gave us the slip," said Burd. "We thought for a while that you had fallen victim to the swamp."

"Go on, Darry," Nell urged. "Tell us what

happened to you after the villain nabbed you by the neck."

"Oh, yes, how did you manage to make that trail through the woods?" questioned Jessie. "We followed it for a long way, and then suddenly lost all trace of you."

"The piece of cloth from my coat was an accident," Darry replied. "It tore on a bush and that gave me an idea. I managed to reach into my pocket and get my notebook, and I will tell you there isn't much of that notebook left."

"Why did the trail end so suddenly?" asked Nell.

"My notebook gave out. Besides," added Darry, "the ruffians had become suspicious and insisted on tying my hands behind my back. We forded a stream near there and doubled back on our tracks toward the hut. I imagine the whole thing was a ruse to divert attention from headquarters."

"You were in the hut then when you called out for help?" asked Jessie, and Darry nodded.

"I knew the boys would be somewhere in the vicinity, although I had no idea you girls would be game enough to come out and join in the search. I yelled once, and then they stuffed my mouth full of some dirty old rag and that was the end of any further vocal protests from yours truly."

"But I should think while you were in the hut you could have snooped around and found out what sort of place it was," said Amy.

"If you can tell me how a fellow can be expected to snoop around with his hands and feet tied and a gag in his mouth you are a better man than I am, sweet sis," Darry retorted. "Beside, there were two rooms in the hut, and the one I was in was as dark as pitch. I defy an owl to see in such a light. It was an age, I lay there gagged and bound."

"Throw another log on that fire, will you, Fol?" asked Nell, for the fire in the grate had died down to a flicker. "All this talk about counterfeiters and ghosts and things makes me long for the cheer of a hearty blaze."

"Darry, please go on," urged Jessie. "What happened when the alarm of fire reached the hut?"

"There was a general stampede to get away from there as soon as possible," replied Darry. "I thought they had forgotten me for a while, and I don't mind telling you that I never remember spending a more uncomfortable few minutes. Even being the victim of a band of criminals seemed a more pleasant prospect than being left, bound hand and foot, to the mercy of a forest fire. A red glow began to filter in through the small window near the roof of the hut and I could

smell the smoke. After a while I could even hear the crackling of timber——"

"Darry, how dreadful!" cried Jessie. "With your hands and feet tied I suppose there was no chance for you to help yourself."

"I had loosened the bonds on my hands by that time," Darry explained. "But my feet were crossed and tied in such a way that I was absolutely helpless. I could have rolled to the door of the hut, and that was what I had started to do when I heard a sound outside and lay still. A moment later a man came in and unbound my feet. Even then it was all I could do to stand." He paused for a moment and grimaced reminiscently.

"If I live to be a hundred I shall never forget the pain in my legs and feet. I stumbled, and if the ruffian had not grabbed me I would have gone flat on my face.

"After that you know nearly all there is to tell," he went on, glancing around at the intent faces. "I found myself in a group of my select friends, and they all seemed to be in the grip of a helpless terror. When I made a dash for my freedom—having recovered the use of my feet—it was an easy matter to get away from them. They seemed hardly to notice what I was doing."

"But, good gracious, they may come after you again, Darry!" exclaimed Nell, as she glanced apprehensively at the closed door and at the win-

dow outside which the rain still fell steadily. "How do we know they may not be hanging around the house now, lying in wait for you!"

"Probably they are engaged in putting as great a distance between us as possible," laughed Darry. "That reminds me," he added, "that if we expect to apprehend these rascals it will be necessary to work quickly. They will no doubt have taken the alarm now, knowing that we are on their trail. Their cue will be to light out, and that, *pronto.*"

"Correct, as usual. But what do you suggest?" asked Fol, with interest. "We can hardly hope to round up this gang of criminals single-handed, and by the time we get back to Gibbonsville and give the alarm it will probably be too late; the counterfeiters will have fled."

"I have thought of that," admitted Darry.

"But I certainly hate like poison to let that gang escape," cried Burd, impatiently.

"Besides that, I have an insatiable curiosity to find out if my suspicions concerning the furnishings of that hut are correct," continued Darry.

"We haven't a gun among us, either," said Burd, disgustedly.

Amy pointed to the ancient firearms that adorned the walls of the lodge.

"What do you mean—we haven't a gun?" she giggled.

"They look as if they hadn't seen active service since the War of the Revolution," remarked Darry, grinning. "I fear if we came armed with them, our friends, the counterfeiters, would give us the merry ha-ha."

"I have an idea, and it is so simple I wonder none of you has thought of it," said Jessie.

"Maybe it is so simple none of us could think of it," murmured Amy, and Jessie ignored her as she deserved:

"Why not broadcast a message by radio—the most efficient detective service in the world!"

CHAPTER XXV

A CAPTURE BY RADIO

IT took the others a moment or two to grasp the meaning of Jessie's suggestion. The idea was too new to them.

Then Burd leaned over and shook her hand warmly.

"We come, brother," he said gravely. "That idea is worthy even of my gigantic brain. When do we begin and where?"

"To-morrow at the forest ranger station," replied Jessie, her eyes dancing. "We can broadcast the description of the criminals and the location of the hut—or rather, the rangers can."

"By George, that is one great idea!" broke in Darry, admiringly. "Funny I never thought of radio in that connection."

"You certainly do take the cake, Jess darling," said Amy, generously, if slangily. "I would do a lot for a mind like that!"

The party broke up soon after that, for aching muscles required their due and the monotonous dripping of the rain made them all very sleepy.

In the morning they woke refreshed to find the

sun shining gloriously on leaves and branches that still dripped moisture. Fatigue had miraculously disappeared and there remained only the pathetically blackened trunks of trees to remind them of the tragic happenings of the day before.

They breakfasted early, eager to enlist the help of the forest rangers as soon as possible in the matter of the mysterious hut in the swamp.

It was impossible for Burd to go, as his ankle was still swollen and very painful, so Amy volunteered to stay behind and read to the invalid. This suggestion was not wholly disinterested on her part, for Amy was still more lame than she cared to admit from the exertions of the day before.

The four young folks started off briskly, spurred on by a recognized need of haste but vaguely saddened by the signs of ruin and destruction that had followed in the wake of the fire.

Nearing the ranger station, Jessie and Darry found that they had gone too fast for Nell and Fol, and lingered to allow the other two to catch up to them.

It was while they were seated on a huge boulder idly talking over the events of the day before that Jessie voiced the thought uppermost in her mind.

"Darry, I have been wondering what you did

about that poor girl, Link Mullen's sister," she said, a little hesitantly. "You never told us, you know."

"Probably that is because I have not been able to do anything," returned Darry. "Eileen Mullen is stubborn and she has enormous pride. She positively refuses to return to Link. She declares that when she left home after their quarrel she intended never to go back."

"I do wish we could help her," said Jessie, longingly, but as Nell and Fol reappeared at that moment, no more was said upon the subject.

"We have nearly come to the house in the woods where they hung out the wash in the living room," Nell called, and Darry nodded.

"I intend to keep my eyes open," he assured her.

But when they came to it the house appeared as dreary and deserted as though no one had lived there for years and the room in which the sheets had been hung was protected from critical inspection by tightly-drawn shades.

At the ranger station Mr. Halsey met them and listened with keen interest to their story of Darry's misadventure in the swamp and of the people who inhabited the hut. They told him also of the ghostlike noises from the swamp and of the white figures they had seen flitting among the trees.

When Jessie explained their idea of soliciting the aid of the police by radio, he agreed to have the message sent out over the airways immediately.

"I wish we might have known of this before," he said, gravely, as he accompanied them to the broadcasting room. "We have suspected for a long time that something illicit and mysterious was being carried on in this vicinity, but there has never been anything definite upon which to base our suspicions. We will investigate this matter thoroughly now, I can assure you."

Messages were sent out for miles in all directions and, satisfied that they had done all in their power to further the ends of justice, the girls and boys said good-bye to Mr. Halsey, after thanking him, and started back toward the lodge.

Once more they passed the house in the woods, and this time Darry saw, or thought he saw, a face at one of the upper windows.

"That is what I call exasperating!" he exclaimed, as they continued on through the woods. "Another moment, and I could have sworn to that fellow's identity."

"If we knew what you were talking about we might follow you more intelligently," suggested Fol, and Darry explained.

"That fellow at the window looked a lot like

one of the men at the hut," he said. "I am pretty positive now that my guess as to where Phrosy's ghosts came from is correct."

Upon reaching the lodge they found the three stay-at-homes looking the pictures of peace and contentment, and immediately set about trying to spoil things for them, as Amy languidly complained.

Having packed all their belongings the day before, it was necessary to reverse the process now that the safety of the lodge was assured. This occupied much of the afternoon, and as the shadows became longer they were oppressed by a strange uneasiness. In every rustle of a leaf, in every cracking of a twig outside the lodge, it seemed they could detect the furtive approach of some of the motley crowd who made their home in the swamp. The air seemed to be murmurous with whispers, the sighing of the wind through the trees took on a weird and wailing sound as though uneasy spirits roamed the woods.

"If radio doesn't get in some fine work pretty soon," grumbled Amy, "I can see where our last few days here are going to be spoiled. I can see a ghost in every shadow."

As though to bear out her assertion there came from the direction of the swamp a faint wailing, growing steadily louder in volume—rising to a shriek and dying off into a frantic sobbing sound.

Again and again it came, and the girls crowded into the living room as though for mutual protection and stared at each other in growing perturbation.

At that moment Darry and Fol burst into the room with Burd limping manfully after them. Behind them came three men, who, despite the fact that they wore no uniform, bore the unmistakable stamp of police officers.

"We are just in time for the entertainment, I see," said the tallest of the three, with a grimness of tone that fell reassuringly upon the electric tension in the room. "These hut dwellers have decided to give a special demonstration for our benefit, evidently."

The three men, led by Aunt Emma, marched into the room recently occupied by Phrosy, and the boys lingered behind for a word with the surprised and excited girls.

"We bumped into these officers just as we were coming in," said Burd. "They received the radio message and have men planted down by the swamp ready to close in on the hut when they give the signal. Come along, if you want to be in on the big show."

"But, Burd, your foot! How can you go?" protested Amy, and Burd looked down at the injured member contemptuously.

"You don't suppose I would let a little thing

like that keep me at home, do you?" he queried. "Just watch me."

At that moment the three officers stalked out again, Aunt Emma, flushed and excited, at their heels. They seemed in a great hurry. They rushed out of the lodge, the girls and boys after them.

Down toward the swamp they ran, the continued wailings of the "ghosts" drowning the sound of their footsteps. Only a few feet from the swamp now, and those absurd white figures still flitting eerily among the trees.

The shrill note of a whistle sounded, followed by the answering shout of men, who came dashing from the shadows.

The shrouded white figures stood still for a moment as though frozen into immobility. Then shrieks and shouts rent the air. The ghosts turned to fly—and were surrounded.

Several of them, dropping the sheets that swathed them, ran for cover, away from the police. But the boys were too quick for them. Darting from their hidden vantage point among the trees, they waylaid the rascals and engaged them in lusty warfare. Back and forth they lunged, fighting desperately, while the girls watched with fascinated interest.

Suddenly Jessie clutched Amy's arm and pointed through the trees.

"Over there!" she cried. "Do you see what I see?"

"Those are women—trying to get away! Come on!" cried Amy.

Without stopping to think, the girls started in pursuit of the two creatures slinking off through the trees. The women, hampered by their clinging skirts, could not run swiftly, and it was comparatively easy for the three athletic girls to overtake them.

Jessie and Amy blocked the path in front while Nell encircled them to the right, cutting off escape in that direction.

The women took a step or two backward, showing their teeth like cornered rats. Then, turning to the one avenue of escape left to them, they crouched low and started to run.

"Stop them! Stop them!" cried Jessie, and at that moment a shadow detached itself from the deeper shadows of the forest and grasped the two women roughly.

"Thought you would get away, eh?" growled a voice which the girls recognized as belonging to the tallest of the three officers who had come to the lodge. "You would, too, if it had not been for these brave young ladies here. You think you're a slick pair, but you didn't get away with it. Come along now. I guess we've got the whole works."

The girls returned in triumph, bearing their prisoners in tow, the grinning officer close at hand. When the boys saw them, they were greeted with loud shouts of delighted surprise.

"We got our men, too," Burd told them boisterously, after the officer had taken the women away. "No more ghosts for ours, girls! We have laid 'em for good!"

"And in more senses than one," added Darry, with a grin.

"Come on over and see this bunch of lowbrows," said Fol, pointing to the group of captors and captives. The latter were still filling the air with shrieks and giving the officers a most unpleasant time of it.

Curiously, the girls and lads approached—but not too closely. An officer detached himself from the group and came toward them. It was the tall man whom they had already met twice that night. He smiled jubilantly upon them.

"One of those prisoners is Pietro Pebbo," he informed them. "He is one of the slickest counterfeiters and law breakers the police have known for many a year, and he has gathered about him a choice set of scoundrels. I would like to ask one question," he added, adjusting his pocket torch so that it illumined their faces. "Who is responsible for that radio message?"

Darry took Jessie by the hand and drew her forward.

"The idea was the property of this young lady," he said gravely. "Allow me to introduce Miss Jessie Norwood!"

"The service thanks you, Miss Norwood," he said, bowing gallantly in acknowledgment of the introduction. "We all thank you."

"Except Pietro Pebbo!" murmured Amy, the irrepressible.

It was the day after the sensational capture of the "ghosts" down by the swamp, and the girls and boys were enjoying a period of well-earned leisure. Besides, having scarcely slept the night before, they really needed rest.

It was Aunt Emma who broke into their peaceful content by rising suddenly and starting toward the house.

"What troubles you, my dear aunt?" inquired Burd, lazily. "I can see by the look in your eye that there is something on your mind."

"I am going to write to Phrosy," returned Aunt Emma, briskly. "Now that the ghosts have departed, it is high time she came back to the kitchen."

"Oh, won't we have a lovely time with Phrosy and no ghosts?" sighed Nell, looking out toward the placid waters of Lake Towako. "Lucky the

fire spared our wonderful view. Where are you going, Jess?"

Jessie, on the way to the lodge, looked over her shoulder with a smile.

"I just happened to think that we haven't set up our radio yet. I am going to hear a radio concert before I am very much older or know the reason why."

Amy rose protestingly from the grassy couch that seemed just made for laziness.

"That child will be the death of me, yet. She is a very glutton for work."

"Just the same," said Nell, as she prepared to join them, "it will be mighty good to 'listen in' again."

THE END

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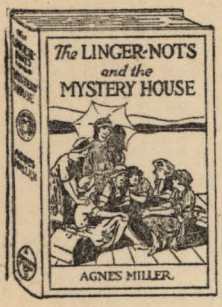

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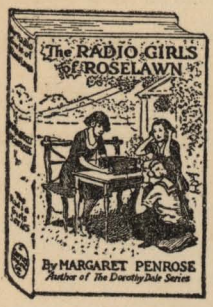

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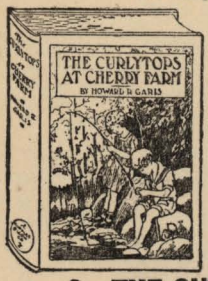

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